

The —
Markenmore
Mystery

by J. S. Fletcher

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MARKENMORE
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THE MARKENMORE MYSTERY

BY
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THE MIDDLE TEMPLE MURDER, ETC.



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CONTENTS

- I TWO WANDERERS RETURN, 9
- II THE BUTLER'S PANTRY, 22
- III GREY DAWN, 34
- IV MARKENMORE HOLLOW, 46
- V DENOUNCED, 59
- VI THE CORONER SITS, 72
- VII MRS. BRAXFIELD SUPPORTS, 84
- VIII THE INCRIMINATING LETTER, 95
- IX THE MIDNIGHT MEETING, 107
- X THE RING AND THE PIPE, 120
- XI FIRST STEPS, 132
- XII THE DOWER HOUSE, 145
- XIII WILLIAM PEGGE, 157
- XIV GONE, 169
- XV WAS IT ROBBERY? 182
- XVI FAMILY MATTERS, 194
- XVII TOO LATE, 207
- XVIII DEEP LANE, 219
- XIX UNDER PRESSURE, 231
- XX VILLAGE GOSSIP, 244

CONTENTS

- XXI ARREST, 257
- XXII MRS. BRAXFIELD'S MOVE, 269
- XXIII THE PROFESSIONAL THEORY, 282
- XXIV THE MAN WHO COULD GUESS, 295
- XXV THE DEVIL'S GRIP, 307

**THE
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CHAPTER I

TWO WANDERERS RETURN

Braxfield, who had been butler to Sir Anthony Markenmore, Baronet, of Markenmore Court, for thirty years, was a man of method. All his life he had cultivated the habit of doing certain things at certain times: the older he grew (and he was now a little over sixty) the more this habit grew upon him. Virtually, he was master of the house; Sir Anthony was an invalid who kept his room; Mr. Guy Markenmore, the elder son, had never crossed his father's threshold for some years; Mr. Harry Markenmore, the younger son, preferred anybody but himself to exercise merely domestic authority; Miss Valencia Markenmore, the only daughter, had been but recently released from the schoolroom; accordingly, Braxfield, one way and another, and without seeming to do so, wielded a mild, unobtrusive autocracy. He had many good rules, and some others that were little better than fads—amongst the last was his trick of locking up the house at precisely eight o'clock every evening.

Had anybody questioned Braxfield as to this curious regulation, the old butler would have given what he believed to be good reasons for his insistence upon it. Markenmore Court was a very old and a very large house, originally built in the last years of Queen Elizabeth, added to during the reign of Charles

the Second, and finally restored and modernized in the time of George the Fourth. It stood on the slope of a gently-rising hill, a mile out of a village which had taken its name from the Markenmore family—a family that had been settled in those parts since the early days of the Norman Conquest; with the exception of a lodge at the entrance gates, there was no dwelling very near it. It possessed an unusual number of doors; doors opening on the terrace, on the courtyard, on the gardens, on the lawns, on the stables, on private walks that wound through the thick shrubberies; it had also corridors, galleries, chambers, little used by the family and the servants.

The family was small; the servants were few; for the Markenmores were comparatively poor, and kept up next to nothing of their ancient state. But poor though they were, they possessed a considerable share of gold and silver plate, of rare china, of valuable glass; there were also pictures in the house that were worth a fortune, and there was scarcely an apartment in which some easily removable thing that would have fetched a handsome price in the sale-room was not openly displayed.

Braxfield, a highly conscientious man, felt himself to be custodian of these family treasures, and he lived in perpetual, nervous fear of their being stolen. Had he been able to have his own way, he would have long since constructed a strong-room, fire-proof, thief-proof, and bundled into it everything of value that the old house contained. But the Markenmores, easily as they allowed their butler to rule them in certain things, were folk who would not permit interference with time-honoured custom and arrangement, and so gold cups and silver salvers,

meticulously polished and carefully dusted, glittered in careless profusion on the massive oak sideboards, and rare ivories and priceless china stood on the open presses and ancient cabinets—as if, said Braxfield plaintively, they were of no more value than the trumpery things arranged in the museum of the neighbouring market-town. And therefore he locked up the house at eight o'clock every night, and carried the keys of some baker's dozen of doors to his butler's pantry: whoever, master or man, maid or mistress, desired to walk out of Markenmore Court, after that hour, had to apply to Braxfield for the means of egress.

On a certain evening in the third week of April, in the year 1912, Braxfield, the simple dinner to which Mr. Harry Markenmore and his sister Valencia sat down every night at seven o'clock, being well over, set out on his usual round of the doors. He always began with the smaller ones and ended up with the great triple door that opened on the terrace. And here came in another of his fads—before finally locking and bolting that door, Braxfield invariably stepped out on the terrace, crossed it to the balustrade which fenced it in from the widespread park that stretched in front, and took a view of all that lay before him: he did this irrespective of the seasons; sometimes, therefore, as in the case of dark winter evenings, he saw nothing but gloom: in summer he saw a great deal of beauty. On this particular occasion he saw the twilight settling upon the old elms and beeches, and over the undulating meadows which lay between Markenmore and the level lands to the southward. The twilight was settling fast, then: within the few minutes during

12 THE MARKENMORE MYSTERY

which Braxfield stood there, looking about him, he saw it through the dusk; the woods and coverts became blurred and indistinct shapes, and beyond them, a mile away, the lights of the village began to twinkle in the darkness. At that he turned towards the door—and then suddenly stopped. Somewhere behind him, a man, taking long rapid strides, was advancing across the lawn beneath the terrace.

There was a powerful lamp just within the big doorway: its rays spread fanwise across the terrace and over the steps which led to the lawn. As Braxfield lingered, wondering who it was that approached (for visitors of any sort were rare at Markenmore Court in those days) a tall figure strode into this arc of light and moved hurriedly up the steps, making for the door—the figure of a big, athletic man, whose evening clothes were only partly concealed by a light, unbuttoned overcoat. That he had not come far seemed evident from the fact that he was bare-headed; he looked, indeed, like a man who has hastily risen from his own dinner-table to hurry to a neighbour's house. Yet the butler gave voice to a sharp, surprised exclamation at the sight of him.

“God bless my life and soul!” he said, as he started out of the shadow in which he was standing. “Mr. John Harborough? Welcome back, sir—I’d no idea you were home again.”

The man thus accosted, now in the full glare of the lamp, turned a bronzed face and a pair of keen, dark, deep-set eyes on the round cheeks and well-filled figure of the old butler. He stretched out his right hand, laughing.

“Hello, Braxfield!” he said cheerily, in the tone of one who greets an ancient acquaintance. “That

you? Still going it as strong as ever, eh? You don't look a day older."

"Men don't alter much at my age, sir," replied Braxfield, shaking the offered hand respectfully. "That comes a bit later, Mr. Harborough. But—you're really back, sir? I hadn't heard of it—still, we don't hear very much our way, now—quieter than ever at Markenmore Court, sir."

"I only got home this afternoon, Braxfield," answered Harborough. "And just as I was finishing my dinner I heard that Sir Anthony was ill, so I came straight across to hear about him? Is it serious?"

"Well, sir, he's been a bit bad this last day or two," said Braxfield. "He varies—of course, it's now a good two years since he ever left his room. Between you and me, Mr. Harborough, he might go any time—any time. So the doctors say, sir."

"Who's here?" asked Harborough, glancing at the lighted windows in front.

"Nobody but Mr. Harry and Miss Valencia," replied the butler. "Mr. Guy—ah, we haven't seen him at Markenmore for—aye, it must be quite seven years. He went off—why, just about the time that you did, Mr. Harborough, and he's never been back—never once! I don't know where he is—I don't believe they do, either."

"Um!" said Harborough. "Harry, now—he was a boy when I went away, and Valencia—she was a slip of a girl."

"Aye, sir," said Braxfield, "but Mr. Harry's now a young man of three-and-twenty, and Miss Valencia—she's a young lady of well over nineteen. You've been away a long time, sir! But come in,

14 THE MARKENMORE MYSTERY

Mr. Harborough, come in!—glad to see you at Markenmore again, sir.”

Harborough followed the old butler inside the house, and through the ancient stone hall, ornamented with deers’ antlers, foxes’ masks, old muskets, and other trophies of the chase and of country life, to a room which he remembered well enough—one which the family now used as a usual gathering-place. There was a bright fire of logs in the hearth; Braxfield pulled up a chair to it.

“Never use the drawing-room nowadays, Mr. Harborough,” he whispered confidentially. “This room does for everything—dining-room, sitting-room, and so on. Not as well off as we used to be, sir—eh? But—we’ve still a glass of rare good port wine for old friends! Can I get you anything, Mr. Harborough?—say the word, sir !”

“Nothing, nothing, Braxfield, thank you,” replied Harborough. He looked round and nodded at various objects. “I remember it all,” he murmured. “Nothing changed! Well, tell the young folks I’m here, Braxfield.”

He stood up by the mantelpiece—a heavily-built, finely-carved piece of old oak—when the butler had gone, and looked once more round the room. He had known that room when he was a boy, nearly thirty years before: it was then the breakfast and morning-room, and the most comfortable place in the big, rambling house. It was comfortable now, with its old furniture, old pictures, old books—everything in it suggested the antiquity of the family to whom it belonged. But in spite of the comfort, homely and sufficient, Harborough’s sharp eyes and

acute perceptions noticed an atmosphere which he summed up in one word, Decay!—its evidences were all around him. Everything was wearing out, slowly, no doubt, but surely.

He looked up suddenly from the threadbare carpet on which he stood to see the door open, and a girl enter and come towards him with outstretched hand—a tall, lissome-figured girl, dark as all the Markemores were, handsome, and somehow, in a way he could not immediately define, suggestive of life and spirit. She was a young beauty, and her freshness was all the more striking in those ancient surroundings: it struck Harborough so much, indeed, that he became tongue-tied, and held her hand and stared incredulously at her for a full minute before he found a word.

“Good heavens!” he exclaimed at last, looking down at her, tall as she was, from his six-foot-two of feet and inches. “Are—are you Valencia?”

“Nobody else—that I’m aware of!” she answered, with a laugh. “Didn’t you know me? I knew you.”

“Ah!” said Harborough. “I was already an oldish sort of chap when I went away!—nearly thirty. But you, then, you were——”

“Thirteen,” she broke in, with another laugh. “All legs and wings, I suppose. And so you have really come home again?”

She pointed to a chair, dropping into one herself, and Harborough sat down too, and continued to look at her, still marvelling that what he remembered as a somewhat plain and awkward child should have been transformed into this bright young creature.

16 THE MARKENMORE MYSTERY

"Only today," he answered; "and as soon as I heard of your father's illness I came straight across to enquire."

"Thank you," she said simply. "But I don't think he is worse than he has been for a long time. He has bad days, of course—he was not so well yesterday—that's no doubt why you came to hear anything. He is very old now, you know—and very feeble."

"If there's anything I can do?" suggested Harborough. "You see—I've come home for good. Nearly seven years of wandering."

"You must have seen a great deal," said Valencia.

"No end," assented Harborough. "In all corners of the globe! But—I thought I'd never seen anything half so attractive as my own old house when I reached it, today! And I'm not going to leave it again. Settle down, you know."

"Grey cloister is a beautiful place," said Valencia. "I have often walked through your park during your absence—and wondered how you could leave it so long."

"I had reasons," said Harborough. "However, here I am again, and very glad to see everybody once more. I've brought home a tremendous collection of all sorts of things—I hope you'll come across and see them, soon?"

"Delighted!" replied Valencia. "I suppose you'll make a sort of museum?"

"Give a lot of 'em away, I think," said Harborough. "No end of things from one place or another. But—bless me, is this Harry?"

The door had opened again, and a young man had come quietly into the room. He was tall, thin, dark;

he wore spectacles, and had a shy, reserved look about him that suggested the student. He smiled slightly as he shook hands with the visitor, but said nothing.

"Harry to be sure," assented Valencia. "Changed, no doubt, as much as—as I have. Still—you remember him?"

"I remember that he went out shooting with me, in my woods, a day or two before I cleared off," said Harborough. He looked from brother to sister with a ruminative inquisitiveness. These two were the younger lot, he was thinking: Guy Markenmore, their elder brother, son of Sir Anthony's first marriage, was several years their senior; he would now be about Harborough's own age. "Done a lot of shooting since those days, no doubt?" he continued, glancing at the brother. "Used to be famous, your lands, for game of all sorts."

Harry Markenmore smiled again, and again said nothing; his sister replied for him.

"Harry's not much of a sportsman," she said. "He's all for books and for business. He's making an effort to—to pull things round. Somehow or other, the estate's got into a poor way. There may be hares and rabbits and pheasants and partridges in plenty—perhaps—but there's precious little money!"

"We had a bad steward," remarked Harry Markenmore, finding his tongue, and giving Harborough a significant glance. "He let things slide. I've taken it over myself, during the last two years. But—all our land's let too reasonably: the rents ought to be raised."

"Stiff proposition, that," said Harborough.

18 THE MARKENMORE MYSTERY

"Most of 'em want their rents reducing, instead of raising. I expect I shall have to go into matters of that sort myself—perhaps we can put our heads together."

"Ah, but you aren't dependent on your farm rents!" said Valencia with a knowing look. "You've got town property. You see what a knowing young woman I am! All we've got is rent from our farms—and we landed folk are doomed: we aren't as well off as the people we let our land to. If Harry and I could do what we'd like, we'd sell, and be done with it."

"A good way—sometimes," said Harborough. "Why not?"

The brother and sister looked at each other.

"It's entailed," said Valencia.

She glanced at Harborough with meaning in her eyes, and Harborough nodded.

"Just so," he remarked. "But—that could be got over if—if your elder brother was agreeable."

Once more the other two exchanged glances.

"We don't know where Guy is," said Harry. "Nobody does—at least, nobody that we know. He's never been heard of for—I think it's nearly seven years."

"It is seven years," remarked Valencia. "I remember." She looked again at Harborough. "He went away, suddenly, just before you did," she added. "And that's seven years ago."

Harborough moved a little uneasily in his chair. He had no wish to be drawn into discussion of the Markenmore family secrets. But he felt a certain curiosity.

"Do you mean that—literally?" he asked.

"Absolutely!" replied Valencia. "None of us—and no one connected with us—have heard a word of him since then."

"But—money matters?" suggested Harborough. "He'd want money. Has he never applied for any?—some allowance, for instance?"

"He'd money of his own," said Harry. "His mother's money all came to him at her death. No—it's as Val says, we've never heard anything of him since he left Markenmore, and we don't know where he is. I wish we did!—my father can't last long."

Harborough rose from his chair.

"Well, I must go," he said. "You'll be sure to let me know if there's anything I can do? But you say Sir Anthony's not in immediate danger?"

"Not immediate," replied Harry. "But—any time. And, as he's fidgety about not being left, you'll excuse me if I go back to him? If he seems a bit stronger tomorrow, I'll tell him you're home again, and no doubt you can see him when you look in. You'll come again soon?"

"Surely!" said Harborough. He walked into the hall with Valencia when Harry had gone, and once more gave her an admonitory look. "You'll not forget to send for me if I can ever give any help?" he continued. "I'm not to be treated as a mere neighbour, you know—now that I'm back!"

"I'll not forget," she answered. She glanced round: at the far end of the shadow-laden hall Braxfield was just appearing, key in hand; she motioned Harborough aside. "There's something I want to ask you," she whispered. "Have you any idea why my brother Guy left home, and why he's never returned? You!—yourself?"

20 THE MARKENMORE MYSTERY

Her eyes, big and dark, were fixed upon him with a peculiar earnestness, and she saw him start a little and compress his lips.

"Tell—me!" she said. "Me!"

Harborough, too, glanced at Braxfield: the old butler, unconscious of this intimate question—and—answer, was drawing nearer.

"I may know—something," murmured Harborough. "If—if I think—on reflection—I ought to tell you—I will. Later."

She gave him an understanding nod, a whispered word of thanks, and went away up the dark staircase behind them. And Braxfield, after a word or two with Harborough, let the visitor out, and locked the big door, and drew across it a weighty chair which had done duty in that respect for many a generation of Markenmores. The house was secured for the night.

Braxfield went back to his pantry—a snug and comfortable sitting-room at the end of the big main corridor. There was a bright fire there, and his easy, well-cushioned arm-chair placed by it. Now was his time of rest and recreation. All done, all quiet, he would smoke his pipe, read the newspaper, and enjoy his glass of whisky. His pipe lay ready to hand: the newspaper flanked it; he went to the cupboard to get out his decanter and his glass. And just as he laid hands on these things, Braxfield heard a sound. His fingers relinquished their hold, dropped to his side, began to tremble. For Braxfield knew that sound—it was familiar enough to him, though it was seven years since he had heard it last. He stood, listening—it came again; a tap, light but firm, three times repeated on the pantry window. And at that

he left the room, turned down a side-passage, and opened a door that admitted to the rose garden. A man stepped in, and in the dim light of a neighbouring lamp the butler saw his face.

“Good Lord ha’ mercy!” he exclaimed, shrinking back against the wall. “Mr. Guy?”

CHAPTER II

THE BUTLER'S PANTRY

The man whom Braxfield thus addressed, and who, in spite of the well-remembered signal on the pantry window was the last person in the world he had thought of seeing, turned a sharp, inquisitive, suspicious glance down the narrow passage, which opened on the main corridor of the house. It shifted just as sharply to the old butler's amazed and troubled face—and the question that followed on it was equally sharp.

“The rest of 'em—in bed?”

Braxfield was beginning to tremble. In the old days, he had often let Guy Markenmore in, late at night, at that very door; the thrice-repeated tap was an arranged signal between them. And in those days he had had that very question put to him more times than he could remember. It had not troubled him then, but now, hearing it again, after the questioner's unexplained absence of seven years, it frightened him. Why did the heir to the Markenmore baronetcy and estates come sneaking to his father's house, late at night, seeking secret entrance, obviously nervous about something? Braxfield looked at him doubtfully.

“Gone to their rooms, Mr. Guy,” he answered. “Or—they may be in your father's. Sir Anthony's about—at his end, sir.”

Again Guy Markenmore looked along the passage. While he looked, Braxfield looked at him. He had altered little, thought Braxfield. He had always been noted since boyhood, for his good looks: he was still good-looking at thirty-five; tall, slim, dark, intense of gaze; the sort of man to attract and interest women. But he looked like a man who had lived hard; a man who had seen things on the seamy side of life, and there was a sinister expression about his fine eyes and the lines of the mouth, scarcely concealed by a carefully kept dark moustache, which would have warned watchful observers to put little trust in him. Eyes and lips alike were wary and keen as they turned again on the butler.

"Come on to your pantry, Braxfield," he said quietly. "Fasten that door."

He walked rapidly up the passage and turned into the corridor when he had issued the order: when the butler, after discharging it, followed him, he stood just within the pantry, holding the door in his hand. And after Braxfield, still upset and wondering, had entered, Guy put the door to and turned the key.

"Look here!" he said in a low voice, motioning Braxfield to the fireside and its cheery blaze, "I want to know something—I thought I saw somebody as I came along. You'll know. Is John Harbor-ough home again?"

Braxfield felt his perceptions quicken at the tone of this question. He nodded, searching Guy's face.

"Yes, sir!" he answered. "Came home today—this very afternoon."

"Has he been here?" demanded Guy.

"Yes, sir—this evening."

"Why? What did he come for?"

"He'd heard your father was ill, Mr. Guy—he came to ask about him."

"Did he mention me?"

"Not—not to my knowledge, sir. He—he saw Mr. Harry and Miss Valencia."

"Has he come back for—for good? To settle down?"

"I understand that he has, sir."

Braxfield was wondering what these questions meant, and his face showed his wonder. But Guy's face had become sphinx-like. He turned away from the butler, took off his smart hat, overcoat, and gloves, threw them into an easy chair in a corner, and drawing a case from his breast-pocket, selected a cigar, and leisurely lighted it. Braxfield knew enough of cigars to know that that was an expensive one; he knew, too, that as far as appearances went the lost son, of seven years' silence had not come home like a prodigal. Guy was dressed in the height of fashion; his grey tweed suit, bearing the unmistakable stamp of Savile Row, stood out in striking contrast to the worn and ancient garments in which Harry Markenmore went about the old place. And on the hand which raised a match to the cigar glittered a fine diamond ring, acting as a sort of keeper to another ring, of curious workmanship and appearance, on the third finger.

"Look here!" said Guy again. "Another question. I've heard that Mrs. Tretheroe—who was Miss Veronica Leighton—is in these parts again. Is that so?"

"Yes, sir," replied Braxfield. "She's come back, too—quite recently. She's taken the Dower House,

Mr. Guy—you know, sir, at the bottom of our park. She took it a month or so ago, from Mr. Harry—he acts in everything now, sir—and she's moved into it."

"She took it?" exclaimed Guy, with emphasis on the personal pronoun. "She! What? . . . is Colonel Tretheroe dead, then?"

"Died out in India, sir—so I'm given to understand—a year since," answered Braxfield. "So—she returned home and came looking for a house about here, and, as I say, has got our Dower House. And she looks no older, Mr. Guy—not a bit! Handsomer than ever, sir."

Braxfield was regaining his confidence, and his tongue. He wanted to talk, now.

"They say she's a very wealthy young widow, Mr. Guy," he went on. "Colonel Tretheroe, he left her everything—and he was a rich man, I'm told. Seems like it, too—she's got a fine staff of servants, and she's spent a lot of money on the house already, and is spending more. Got a house-party there just now—London people I believe. Seems inclined to enjoy herself, I think, sir."

"Are there any children?" asked Guy.

"No children, sir," replied Braxfield. "Never been any, so I'm told."

Guy looked around at the familiar features of the old butler's sanctum. Nothing seemed to have changed. His glance rested on the decanter which Braxfield had set on the table just before hearing the tap at the window.

"Give me a drink, Braxfield," he said suddenly. "I guess you've some of our old whisky left, even after seven years. And some soda-water. Get one yourself—it's a long time since you and I had

a drink together—though we've had many a one in this very room in the old days!"

He laughed cynically as he lifted the glass which Braxfield presently handed to him—but there was no answering laugh from the old butler. Braxfield, indeed, respectfully raising his own glass with a murmured expression of his good wishes, seemed inclined to become sentimental.

"It is a very long time, sir," he said. "Yes, a very long time, Mr. Guy! But I humbly trust it's over, sir—I hope you're coming home for good."

"Then your hopes are doomed to disappointment, Braxfield," replied Guy, with another cynical laugh. "I'm not! No more Markenmore Court for me. I've done very nicely without it and I don't propose to grow cabbages here when I can grow more profitable things elsewhere. No, Braxfield. I'm not coming back."

"But, Mr. Guy—your father?" said the old butler. "He can't last long, sir. And—the title—and the estates, Mr. Guy!"

"I can't help succeeding to the baronetcy, Braxfield, though I don't care twopence about it," answered Guy; "and as for the estates, they can be managed well enough without my help or presence. As a matter of fact, I don't want 'em! I'm a well-to-do man—I've been on the Stock Exchange, Braxfield, for over six years, and made a pot of money. But now look here," he continued, interrupting the old butler's congratulations, "you say that Harry is acting as a sort of steward; does he do well?"

"Very well indeed, sir, as far as I can judge," replied Braxfield. "Charlesworth—our old steward—you remember him, well enough, Mr. Guy—he let

things get into a bad way, and your father didn't check him. But when your brother became of age, he and your father made some arrangement, and Mr. Harry took hold of things, and he pensioned Charlesworth off, and since that he's seen to everything. Helped a good deal, of course, sir, by Miss Valencia—a very clever young lady your sister's turned out, Mr. Guy. You'll—you'll let me fetch them down, sir, before you go to bed?"

Guy finished the contents of his glass, mixed himself another drink, and sitting down in a big chair by the blazing logs, shook his head.

"I'm not going to bed, Braxfield," he answered. "I came down from town on special business, and I'm going to return to town by a very early morning train, which I shall catch at Mitbourne station. But I shall see the two youngsters—in fact, my business is with them. First of all, though, I want you to tell me one or two things: then you can go and tell them I'm here—quietly, and not disturbing Sir Anthony—I don't want him to know I'm anywhere about. Now, first—you say Mrs. Tretheroe has a house-party at the Dower House?"

"Yes, sir," replied Braxfield. "A biggish one."

"Then they're not likely to keep very early hours there just now," observed Guy.

"I hear that they keep very late ones, sir," said Braxfield. "Dancing—and so on."

"Very well," continued Guy. "Now then—does Mrs. Wrenne still keep the Sceptre Inn, in the village?"

Braxfield's plump countenance changed colour—he blushed, like any young girl.

"Well, sir," he faltered, with a shy laugh. "She

doesn't. The fact is, sir—you'll laugh at me, Mr. Guy—Mrs. Wrenne and me, sir, we got married, four years ago, sir. So Mrs. Wrenne is now Mrs. Braxfield."

"Bless me!" exclaimed Guy. "Caught you at last, eh, Braxfield? Then I suppose Mrs. Braxfield is—here?"

"No, sir, and never has been," replied the old butler. "I live here, as usual. But my wife, sir, and her daughter—you remember Poppy, Mr. Guy? a pretty girl that's now a handsome young woman—they live at Woodland Cottage, across our park. My wife took it, sir, when she left the Sceptre."

"Oh!" said Guy. "Then—who has the Sceptre, now?"

"Man named Grimsdale, sir—he was groom to Sir James Marchant, formerly. He's improved it a good bit, sir; since all this motoring began, there's a lot of traffic along our main road."

Guy nodded and drew out his watch.

"Not yet ten o'clock," he muttered. He sat for a minute or two, evidently deep in thought, while Braxfield watched him with curiosity. "All right, Braxfield," he said at last, looking up from the hearth. "Go and tell the two youngsters I'm here. Quietly mind!—impress upon them that my father is not to know anything."

"Very good, sir," assented Braxfield. "They may be with him—or one of them may be—but I'll manage it. There's a trained nurse in the house, Mr. Guy, so she'll attend to Sir Anthony while they come down."

Guy made no answer, and Braxfield went away through the silent house and upstairs to Harry Mark-

enmore's room. The room was lighted, but empty. Harry, said Braxfield to himself, would be with his father. He crossed the corridor and knocked gently at Valencia's door. Valencia answered the summons at once and came out in a dressing-gown; something in the old butler's face made her glance apprehensively at him. But Braxfield shook his head.

"It's not that, Miss Valencia," he hastened to say. "You—you mustn't be alarmed—the fact is, Mr. Guy's downstairs! He came just after you and Mr. Harry had come up, and he wants to see you, both. But—Sir Anthony's not to know."

Valencia's face hardened. She had no recollection of any childish affection for her elder brother, and as far as she could remember she had never heard any good of him: certainly, for seven years, he had treated his family as if it had no existence. She looked doubtfully and hesitatingly at Braxfield.

"What does he want?" she asked.

"I can't say, miss," replied the old butler, "except that he says he's come down to see you and Mr. Harry on special business and doesn't want your father to know."

Valencia glanced from Braxfield along the gloomy corridor. Innumerable doorways, admitting to cavernous chambers, were ranged there—two or three dozen of guests could have been put up in Markenmore Court, but she knew that not one of those rooms could be prepared in less than twenty-four hours; each was damp, cold, out of use.

"Where on earth are you going to put him, Braxfield?" she said. "There isn't a bed in the place that's fit to give him."

"He's not stopping, Miss Valencia," answered

30 THE MARKENMORE MYSTERY

Braxfield. "I—I don't quite understand his movements, but he's going, I believe, as soon as he's seen you and Mr. Harry. He spoke of a very early morning train from Mitbourne."

Valencia hesitated a moment: then she moved off in the direction of her father's sick-room.

"Tell him we'll both come down in a few minutes," she whispered to Braxfield. "Where is he—in the morning-room?"

"No, miss—in the butler's pantry," answered Braxfield.

Valencia nodded and turned away, and Braxfield went back to the visitor.

"Coming in a minute or two, sir," he answered. "Both!"

"I suppose they've changed," remarked Guy unconcernedly.

"Oh, a good deal, sir," said Braxfield. "Seven years, sir, is a long time—at their ages."

"Let's see," continued Guy. "Harry'll be—what is it?—twenty-three, and Valencia's about twenty—nearly twenty. Um! Has my sister any love-affairs?"

"Not to my knowledge, sir," replied Braxfield. "Miss Valencia, sir, is a young lady that hasn't seemed to favour the society of gentlemen, so far, sir. Outdoor life, Mr. Guy, is what appeals to her, I think—gardening, games, walking, bit of rabbit-shooting, and so on. A very healthy young lady, sir. I hear them coming, sir—I'd better leave you."

"Stop where you are, Braxfield," said Guy quietly. "I want you there."

He rose from his chair as his brother and sister entered the room, and remaining on the hearth-rug,

nodded unconcernedly to both, as if he had seen them but a day before. But as they came up and shook hands with him, his nod of greeting changed to one of approval, and he smiled at his sister.

"How do you do, Harry—how do you do, Valencia!" he said. "Both changed a great deal! And you, Val—grown into a beauty, of course! All you ugly little girls do! Well—that's right. I suppose, in the character of heavy-brother, I ought to express a pious hope that you're as good as you're good-looking!"

"Spare yourself the trouble!" retorted Valencia. She gave him a keen look as she took the chair that Guy had risen from. "I hope you are," she said. "Though—I doubt it!"

Guy glanced at his brother, including Valencia in a side-glance.

"So—she's got a tongue, this sister of ours, eh, Master Harry?" he said, with a half-amused, half-cynical laugh. "Never mind!—all the women of our family always have, I believe. Well—aren't you glad to see me?"

"Why should we be?" demanded Valencia. "You've never been near us, and never once written to any of us, for seven years? You may be our brother—half-brother, rather—but you're a stranger."

Braxfield, standing diffidently between the table and the door, retreated into a far corner of the room, and Harry Markenmore turned on his sister.

"Don't, Val," he muttered. "Not quite that, you know." He glanced at his elder brother, who was regarding Valencia from his position on the hearth-rug with speculative, smiling eyes. "Valencia is a

32 THE MARKENMORE MYSTERY

bit outspoken," he said deprecatingly. "Of course, we're glad to see you, Guy."

"All right, Harry, my lad!" responded Guy. "I'll take it that you are—of course."

"I don't know why we should be," asserted Valencía. "As I said—we're strangers. Surely, you didn't expect me to know you?"

"You'll know me better, perhaps, my girl, in quite another way, before long," answered Guy. "Come! there's enough of these pleasant family exchanges. I came down especially to see you two," he went on, seating himself. "I'd better go straight to business. Look here, both of you—in the ordinary course of things our father can't last long, and I shall succeed to title and estates. Eh?"

"Yes," said Harry.

"The title I can't help," continued Guy. "The estates I don't want. I've made enough of my own, and I shall make more. I don't know how things can be done, legally, but anyhow, as soon as I come into the property I intend to make it over, somehow or other—we'll set the lawyers to work—to you two. You can look on it as your own, from this out. Understand?"

Harry started and looked at his sister. But Valencía was looking at Guy.

"Generous of you!" she said suddenly. "But—why do you come to tell us this, now?"

"Because I'm going off to America, on business—New York, two or three other places, in a day or two, and shan't be back for quite a year—maybe more," answered Guy. "And I wanted you to know, in case anything happens. If my father dies—well, Harry'll just carry on, and when I come back we'll do things

legally. Markenmore is to be yours—I don't want it. You hear?—and you hear, too, Braxfield?"

"I hear, sir," answered the butler.

"There's nothing of Markenmore that I want," continued Guy, "except one thing—and I want that now. Harry," he went on, pulling out a small key, "you know my old room? Run up there, unlock the right-hand drawer of the bureau in the corner, and bring me a green leather pocket-book that you'll see there—that's what I want. Good boy!" He glanced at Valencia when Harry had taken the key and gone, and saw that she was staring hard at his right hand. "Well?" he asked, with a light laugh. "What are you looking at?"

Valencia remained silent for a moment. Then she spoke—abruptly.

"I'm looking at that queer ring on your third finger!" she answered.

CHAPTER III

GREY DAWN

Braxfield, who, from his retired position in the background was watching Guy Markenmore with inquisitive eyes, saw him start a little at Valencia's direct intimation. The start was followed by a laugh which was not exactly spontaneous.

"Well?" said Guy. "What about the ring? It's—simply a ring."

"Just so—a ring," remarked Valencia. "But—a peculiar one. And I know somebody who has one that's a precise duplicate of it."

"Who?" asked Guy.

"Mrs. Tretheroe," replied Valencia. "She always wears it. I thought it was some ring she'd picked up in India. But—yours is just the same. Odd!—that you should both have rings which are exactly alike."

"So Mrs. Tretheroe comes here?" suggested Guy.

"Of course! Didn't we all know her before she was married," answered Valencia. "So far as I remember, you and she used to go about together a good deal."

Guy yawned, but it seemed to his sister that the yawn was affected.

"Forgotten pretty nearly everything about those days!" he said, with an attempt at unconcern. "Long time ago—and I've been otherwise engaged since I left here."

Valencia turned and looked at Braxfield.

"See if anything's being wanted upstairs, Braxfield," she said, with a meaning glance. "You might sit with Sir Anthony a bit—make some excuse if he wants either of us."

Braxfield took the hint and disappeared, and Valencia turned to her brother.

"Guy," she said, calling him by name for the first time, "I'm sorry if I seemed to be ungracious just now. But—but you haven't treated us well, nor kindly. And I want to know why you've never been here, all this time—and why you ever left here at all. Can't you tell me?"

There was a certain earnestness in the girl's tone that made Guy, inclined to be restive at first under her questioning, change his mood and become reflective. He threw away his cigar, rose from his chair, and thrusting his hands in his pockets, began to pace the room, evidently in deep thought.

"I might tell you some day," he said at last. "Perhaps—later on—after thinking it over, I will."

"That's the second time tonight I've had that answer to that very question!" exclaimed Valencia. "In practically the same words!"

Guy stopped short in his perambulations and stared at her.

"Whose answer was the first?" he asked abruptly.

"Harborough's," replied Valencia. "He, too, has come back. He was here this evening. I knew that you and he were friends, once. I asked him if he knew why you left home. He answered—just what you've answered."

"Well?" asked Guy, with something very like a growl. "Well?"

"I suppose he does know," said Valencia.

Guy began to walk about again. He had taken several turns before he spoke.

"I'll give you a piece of advice about John Harborough," he said at last. "He's a man—if certain conditions arise—of a black and fierce temper. You be careful. Otherwise——"

"What?" demanded Valencia.

"Otherwise I've nothing to say against him," concluded Guy. "And now—that's enough! I didn't come here to be questioned. I've told you and Harry why I came, and I mean to do well and fairly by both of you on the lines I've suggested. Never you mind why I left Markenmore, nor why I stayed away!"

"I wish you'd tell me just one thing, though," persisted Valencia. "Had it anything to do with Veronica Leighton, as she was then?—Mrs. Tretheroe?"

"I'm not going to tell you anything," answered Guy peremptorily. "It's nothing to do with you nor with anybody, now. I started out on a line of my own when I left here, and I've done with this. I shall never come near the place again when I leave it to-night; henceforth it's yours and Harry's. When I come back from America, you can both come and see me in London, whenever and as often as you like. But Markenmore will see me no more—I hate it!"

"Your father?" suggested Valencia.

Guy, still pacing the room, shook his head.

"You were too young to realize things," he answered. "But my father and I never got on—from the first we never got on. He never treated me well, and it was worse after he married your mother. If it hadn't been for her, I'd have run away from this

when I was a boy. But your mother was a good sort—she did treat me well, right up to the time she died, when you and Harry were children. It's because I remember her and her kindness that I'm going to make Markenmore over to you now."

"Thank you!" said Valencia. "We'll remember. But Guy—your father's at the end of things. Won't you see him?"

"No!" answered Guy sharply. "No! I'm dead to him—and what's the good of upsetting a dying man? Let things be, Valencia—as I said just now, perhaps you'll know more and understand more, later on. At present——"

The door opened just then, and Harry came back into the room. In his right hand he carried a lighted candle; in the left, the pocket-book, an old-fashioned thing of faded green leather, for which his brother had sent him. With a muttered word of thanks Guy took both pocket-book and candle from him, and crossing the room to its furthest side set down the candle on an oak press, and by its light proceeded to examine the pocket-book, while Harry and Valencia watched him. The examination was brief: Guy, after a quick glance at some of the papers which he drew from the old case, transferred certain of them to a wallet which he produced from a hip-pocket; this done he put wallet and pocket-book together and placed them where the wallet had come from. He blew out the candle and turned to his brother and sister.

"Some old papers there that I wanted," he said unconcernedly. "Nothing of any importance, but I wanted to have them." He sat down again and lighted another cigar. "Now," he went on, "as I

haven't much time, just let us talk business. Tell me, Harry, exactly how things stand about the estate: what you're doing with it, and so on."

During the next half-hour, Valencia, listened to the two men as they discussed matters of rent, repairs, income, outgoings, realized that whatever else Guy might be, he was a shrewd business man; she realized, too, that he was honestly anxious to give Harry sound advice as to his future management of the Markenmore properties. Finally, he pulled out and handed to his younger brother a card.

"There's my business address in London," he said, "and on the other side is an address in New York, to which you can write at any time during the next twelve months. Let me know how things go—everything. And now, I must be off."

He jumped to his feet and made for his hat and overcoat. Valencia glanced at the clock.

"But why must you go now?" she asked. "You say you're going to get the early morning train at Mitbourne? That doesn't leave till after four o'clock. And it's now only half-past ten."

Guy had already got into his overcoat. He smiled at Valencia's questioning look.

"Just so!" he answered. "But there's somebody else in this neighbourhood that I've got to see—on business. Appointment, you understand?—already made. I must be off, or I shall be late for it."

"But—you ought to have had some supper—or something," protested Valencia.

"That'll be ready where I'm going," replied Guy. "There—don't bother yourselves! Call Braxfield down—good old chap, that, and I must say good-bye to him."

Five minutes later he had said good-bye to all three, and Braxfield had let him out by the door at which he had entered. The old butler went back to his pantry to find his young mistress standing by the fire, evidently in deep thought. She looked up as he entered.

"Braxfield," she said, "which way did Mr. Guy go?"

"Towards the village, miss," replied Braxfield. "Turned through the shrubbery."

Braxfield was the sort of man to whom everybody is confidential. Valencia saw no reason for keeping back what was in her mind.

"He said he had a business appointment with somebody in the neighbourhood," continued Valencia. "With whom could it be, Braxfield?"

"That I couldn't say, miss," answered the old butler. "But Mr. Guy—he knew a lot of people hereabouts—in the old days."

"But at this time of night?" said Valencia. "Besides, who is there, anywhere about here? I mean, anybody he'd be likely to want to see? There are only two or three farmers—and the Vicar."

"He did mention the Sceptre Inn to me, miss," observed Braxfield, "in a way that made me wonder if he'd some idea of calling there. But——"

The light tinkle of a bell, very gently pulled, interrupted Braxfield at the beginning of whatever suggestion he was going to offer. At its sound he and Valencia stared and looked at each other.

"He must be back again!" exclaimed Valencia.

"No, miss," said Braxfield; "Mr. Guy would come to the garden entrance—always his way, that. This is our front door bell."

He picked up an old-fashioned lantern as he spoke, lighted the candle with it, and went out. Valencia followed him. The corridor and the big hall were in darkness; the turning of the key and withdrawing of the bolts made a harsh, grating sound in the silence that had long since fallen on the old house. And when Braxfield opened the door, the night outside showed black, and there, on the steps beneath the portico, they saw in the light of the lantern, cloaked and veiled, a woman. But in spite of the wraps, Valencia knew who the visitor was.

"Mrs. Tretheroe!" she exclaimed.

Mrs. Tretheroe answered with a low, half-excited, half-nervous laugh. She stepped inside, passed Braxfield, laid a hand on Valencia's arm, and pushed her gently towards the end of the hall, where a faint gleam of light penetrated from the open door of Braxfield's pantry.

"Hush!" she whispered. "I want a word with you, Valencia. Tell the butler to wait there—I'm going again in a minute."

"Stay there, Braxfield," said Valencia. "Mrs. Tretheroe'll want letting out presently. Come along here," she continued, going towards the lighted room. "What is it?"

Mrs. Tretheroe followed the girl inside the pantry, half closed the door, and threw back her veil and her heavy cloak. In spite of her wonder, Valencia could not avoid staring at her in admiration. Mrs. Tretheroe was in her finest feathers, a wonderful dinner-gown, the like of which Valencia had never seen; diamonds were in her chestnut-hued hair and at her white throat; her violet eyes were alive with excitement; her scarlet lips were slightly parted; Valencia

realized that this was a much more beautiful woman than she had previously thought her to be. And for the first time she began to realize, too, that she was a dangerous one.

The violet eyes looked sharply round the room before settling on the girl's face. There was a question in them—her lips repeated it.

"Your brother—Guy? Is he here?"

"No!" answered Valencia. "He's not!"

Mrs. Tretheroe's fine eyebrows drew together in a puzzled frown.

"But—my coachman, Burton, tells me that he saw him, this evening, coming here?" she said half-petulantly. "He must be here!"

"He isn't," retorted Valencia. "He's been here—and he's gone."

"Gone? Where?"

"I don't know," said Valencia. "What do you want?"

Mrs. Tretheroe laughed, and as she laughed she drew her cloak and veil about her.

"I wanted to see him again, to be sure," she answered defiantly. "Why not? However, I suppose he'll come to see me tomorrow."

"No!" declared Valencia. "He's gone. Back to London."

"There's no train to London at this time of night, child," said Mrs. Tretheroe. She laughed a little maliciously. Then the note in her voice turned to one of sudden knowingness. "Ah!" she exclaimed. "I see!—no doubt he's gone to call on me, now! I've missed him. Bye-bye, Valencia; sorry I have disturbed you."

She was out of the room and flying up the corridor

and across the hall before Valencia could reply; a moment later the front door closed on her. Braxfield came back.

"Is there anything I can do upstairs, miss?" he asked. "The nurse, now?—is there anything she'll be requiring for the night?"

"I don't know of anything, Braxfield, thank you," said Valencia. She was leaving the room then, but suddenly she paused, hesitated, and turned back to the old butler. "Braxfield," she continued, with a look of confidence, "you've been in our family a long time, haven't you?"

"Most of my life, miss," replied Braxfield. "Footman, ten; butler, thirty years."

"And you know a lot of our affairs," said Valencia. "And no doubt more than I've any idea of. So—I wish you'd tell me something. Was there ever any love affair between my brother Guy and Mrs. Tretheroe—when she was Miss Leighton? I want to know, Braxfield."

Braxfield, in his turn, hesitated. He laughed, a little nervously—the laugh, too, of a man disposed to be indulgent towards memories of old days.

"Well, you know, miss, of course a man in my position sees and hears a good deal," he said at last. "Miss Leighton, as she was then—Mrs. Tretheroe, as she is now—was a great beauty, and, to be sure, a good deal run after. There was talk about her and Mr. Guy—they were about together, hunting, racing, and what not. But then—there were others after her."

"What others?" demanded Valencia.

"Well, miss, there was Mr. Harborough—that was here tonight," continued Braxfield. "He seemed

very much taken at one time—you were away at your school in those days, miss, or you'd recollect. Yes, there was him—in fact, people used to wonder which it was going to be—Mr. Guy or Mr. Harborough. There were others—several of 'em—but those two were what you might call first and second favourites, to all appearance."

"Then why didn't she marry one of them?" asked Valencia. "Do you know, Braxfield?"

"I don't, miss—no, I know nothing on that point. All I do know is that all of a sudden, without notice, as it were, both young gentlemen left these parts. Mr. Guy, he went off—very sudden, indeed—and we've heard nothing of him till now. Then Mr. John Harborough, off he went too—travelling in foreign countries. And they hadn't been gone long—not a fortnight, I think—before it was given out that Miss Leighton was going to be married to Colonel Tretheroe. He was in command of his regiment, miss, at Seleaster Barracks. I mind him well enough: a red-faced gentleman."

"Older than herself?" asked Valencia.

"Old enough to be her father, miss. But a very wealthy gentleman. They were married here in our church, soon after that, and a bit later the regiment was ordered out to India, and, of course, she went with her husband. Queer, isn't it, miss," continued Braxfield, with a shy glance at his young mistress, "that these people which knew each other well in the old days, Mrs. Tretheroe and the two gentlemen, Mr. Guy and Mr. Harborough, should all turn up again—here—about the same time? What they call coincidence—though, to be sure, Mrs. Tretheroe's been back a month or so. But those other two—both

coming here tonight—it gave me quite a turn.”

“I suppose it was mere coincidence,” said Valencia.

She bade the old man good night and went away upstairs. At the door of her father’s room she met Harry. Sir Anthony, he said, had fallen on a light sleep; the nurse was with him, and there was nothing they could do. They turned off to their own rooms.

“Who came to the front door?” whispered Harry as they went along the corridor.

“Mrs. Tretheroe,” answered Valencia.

“Mrs. Tretheroe! At this time? What did she want?”

“Guy!”

“Guy? Who told her he was here?”

“Her coachman had seen him coming here.”

“Well?” asked Harry, after a pause. “What then?”

“I told her he’d gone. She went, then. Went in a hurry, too. Harry!”

“What?”

“It strikes me there’s something going on underneath these sudden reappearances. I don’t know what—but something. Mrs. Tretheroe was just mad to see Guy! And—I don’t trust her. She’s—oh, I don’t know what she is! Never mind—let’s go to bed.”

Valencia went to bed, but it was a long time before she slept, and when at last she did sleep, her slumbers were light and troubled. She woke suddenly in the end—the grey dawn was breaking, and through her open windows she heard the hooting of owls—ominous and fearsome sound—in the woods beyond the park. Something impelled her to rise, throw up her blinds,

and look out of the window. Her room faced the east; far away across the park and the low range of hills beyond the fringe of old woodland that enclosed it, a broad belt of red was slowly widening. And already thrush and blackbird were piping in the coverts, and a lark was rising from the home meadow.

Somewhere in the neighbouring plantations a shot suddenly rang out: its echoes sounded loud from the thick woods. Valencia was wondering what took their one gamekeeper abroad so early when a tap came at her door; the door opened, and Harry looked in. One glance at his face told her his news. She went hurriedly towards him, a question in her eyes. Harry bent his head in answer.

“In his sleep,” he whispered.

CHAPTER IV

MARKENMORE HOLLOW

About half a mile to the north-east of Markenmore Court, flanked by a narrow, deep-set lane that ran up from the main road of the village to the overhanging downs, and backed by the woods and coverts which lay between the foot of those downs and the level lands beneath, stood a small, comfortable, picturesque old house called The Warren. It had been built in the middle of the eighteenth century by the fifth baronet, Sir Geoffrey Markenmore, as a residence for his steward, and had been occupied by successive stewards until recent years, when they were relegated to a more convenient house in the centre of the village. Since then The Warren had been let to tenants; its position, its fine outlook over park, meadows, and sea made it a desirable property for any man of quiet tastes. Its present occupant was Mr. Samuel Fransemmery, a middle-aged bachelor, by profession a barrister-at-law, who, once taking a holiday in these regions, had found The Warren to let and had immediately snapped it up on a twenty-one years' lease. It was, indeed, the very place for which Mr. Fransemmery had been looking for some time; barrister though he was (of the Middle Temple) he had scarcely ever held a brief in his life, and the law had no particular attraction for him. Nor was

he in any way dependent upon it: he possessed very ample private means, which enabled him to gratify his particular tastes to the full. Those tastes were simple. Mr. Fransemmery's days were passed in collecting books and antiquities, doing a little flower-cultivation in his charming gardens, and taking long walks in the country. He was a bit of a botanist, and a bit of a geologist: what with one thing and another his time went pleasantly—and uneventfully.

In outward appearance, Mr. Fransemmery was a cheerful little person. Somewhat under medium height, he was inclined to portliness; like many little men, he carried himself very erect, and was proud of the fact that he was as straight of back and square of shoulder at fifty as he had been at twenty-five. His clean-shaven face was round and rosy; his eyes were bright behind his big gold-mounted spectacles; he had beautiful teeth and plentiful light-brown hair; scrupulous to a fault about his personal appearance, he always looked, said the village folk, as if he had just come out of a band-box, by which they meant that he was perfectly groomed. There was, indeed, an air of perpetual youth and freshness about Mr. Fransemmery: each spring seemed to find him younger than the last. People chaffed him about his juvenility; if he ever troubled himself to explain it, he did so by solemnly repeating the old saying—"Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise." Mr. Fransemmery, since his arrival at The Warren, and his beginning of a truly rural existence, had always gone to bed at half-past nine o'clock and risen with the lark.

He was up with the lark on this particular morning; was rising, as a matter of fact, at the very mo-

ment wherein, half a mile away at Markenmore Court, Harry Markenmore was quietly telling his sister Valencia that their father had died in his sleep. Mr. Fransemmery, of course, knew nothing of that; his thoughts were not of death but of life. He, too, drew his blinds and saw the red dawn, and heard the thrushes and blackbirds in the neighbouring plantations; he smelled the scent of the spring-tide, and longed to be out of doors. It was his custom to go for a long walk every morning before his nine-o'clock breakfast; he was going to keep to it this morning. But first there were things to be done. His servants were never up before six: Mr. Fransemmery did things for himself. He was a great man for labour-saving devices; in his house at any hour of the day or night, hot water was ready in any sleeping chamber. Accordingly Mr. Fransemmery could get his bath and his shaving water by merely twisting a tap; he had a patent stove, too, in his own bedroom whereon he would make tea or coffee in a few minutes. So now, long before his housekeeper, his parlourmaid, and his housemaid had opened their eyes, he was bathing, shaving, dressing, and in due time sipping his fragrant Mocha and nibbling digestive biscuits. At precisely six o'clock, clad in a smart suit of grey tweed, and shod in stout shooting boots, strong enough to meet the searching morning dews, he went downstairs, picked up an ash-plant stick in his hall, and putting a rakish-looking cap on his head, set out across the high lands across The Warren.

Mr. Fransemmery's first steps took him out of his own trim surroundings and across a little well-stocked orchard—planted by himself—to the lane which ran

up from Markenmore to the crest of the downs. This was one of those lanes peculiar to the south of England, and rarely found elsewhere. It was deep-set in the land; high banks on either side shut it in; each bank was topped by an equally high hedgerow of hawthorne, holly, and elder-bush, liberally mixed with bramble, gorse, and honeysuckle. The road-surface, rough and rutty, lay deep down beneath these prodigalities of vegetation; in winter it was usually a mass of mud; in summer it was ankle-deep in dust. But Mr. Fransemmery did not propose to follow the lane: he descended into it by a rustic stairway of logs, set in the bank, crossed the ruts at the bottom, and ascended the opposite bank by a similar series of steps. There he climbed a stile and betook himself along a narrow footpath hedged in on either side by laurel shrubs; this led him to the palings of a smart little garden at the back of which stood a commodious dwelling house, Woodland Cottage, the residence of Mrs. Braxfield. And there, on a bit of open ground at the side of the garden, flinging corn to her fowls, Mr. Fransemmery saw Mrs. Braxfield herself.

Mr. Fransemmery had known Mrs. Braxfield for some years. He had once or twice stayed at the Sceptre Inn before he came to live at The Warren. In those days Mrs. Braxfield was Mrs. Wrenne, relict of Peter Wrenne, deceased. She was a clever, bustling, managing woman, who knew how to do things. Peter had left her money and one child—a girl named Poppy, who from the days of short frocks bade fair to be a beauty, and had made good her promise. Mrs. Wrenne continued to make money at the Sceptre; folks said she was putting by a for-

tune for Poppy—certainly Poppy was being brought up like a lady, sent to smart boarding schools, and such like. And then, all of a sudden, Mrs. Wrenne retired from business, took Woodland Cottage, and married Braxfield. Why she married him, nobody ever knew; Braxfield continued to live in his accustomed fashion at Markenmore Court, and if he ever visited his spouse, it was only for an hour or two of an afternoon or evening, or for a very occasional week-end. But, as people of the neighbourhood said, Braxfield, too, would retire sometime, probably when Sir Anthony died—and then, no doubt, he would go home to Woodland Cottage and his wife for good.

Mr. Fransemmery looked approvingly at Mrs. Braxfield as he drew near to her and her chickens. He admired her. Being a little man himself, he had a keen eye for women of the somewhat massive order. Mrs. Braxfield was a big, strong, handsome woman of forty-seven or so, who looked quite five years younger—she had an excellent figure, fine hair, teeth, and colouring, and a pair of quick, shrewd, hazel eyes, in which there was still a spice of roguishness. She smiled at Mr. Fransemmery as he put his fingers to his rakish shepherd's-plaid cap, and Mr. Fransemmery smiled back.

“The top of the morning to you, ma'am!” exclaimed Mr. Fransemmery. “Many of 'em, too! Ah, Mrs. Braxfield, you and I are the only sensible people about here, I think. Here we are, fresh and rosy—and in your case, beautiful as the day itself—enjoying fresh air and these delightful country sights and sounds while most of our neighbours—forgetful

of Dr. Watts and his little hymn—are snoring in their beds. You’re a wise woman, ma’am!”

Mrs. Braxfield laughed, showing her white teeth, and bringing a dimpled chin into play.

“Why that’s as may be, Mr. Fransemmery,” she retorted, coquettishly. “But perhaps I’d lie snoring—not that I ever do snore that I know of—in my bed, if I’d the chance. You get up early because you like it—I get up because I’ve things to do. If I’d three strong women servants, as you have, I’d not get up at five o’clock of a morning, nor yet at six, I’d promise you—not I! I could do with more bed than I get.”

“In that case, ma’am,” said Mr. Fransemmery, “I should do one of two things. Either I should get a stout serving-lass into the house, or I should request Miss Poppy to rise and feed the fowls.”

Mrs. Braxfield emptied her sieve of corn amongst the chickens and drew nearer to the hedge.

“Oh well,” she said. “Poppy’s not a bad one for getting up and doing her bit. But she’s away just now, visiting one of her old school friends, so I’m alone. And as to having a girl, Mr. Fransemmery, I’d rather not be bothered with one—they’re more bother than they’re worth. Of course, I’ve a woman comes every day to do the rough work—what else there is to do, Poppy and me can manage well enough. I don’t know how it’ll be though, when Braxfield comes to live here—a man makes a difference, and I suppose we shall have to keep a servant or two when he retires.”

“He’s expecting to retire, then?” asked Mr. Fransemmery, who had a weakness for village gossip. “Had enough of it, eh?”

"He'll not retire while Sir Anthony lives," answered Mrs. Braxfield.

"From what I hear that won't be long," observed Mr. Fransemmery. "When I called at the Court, yesterday morning, to enquire, as I do every day, ma'am, I understood from Miss Markenmore that according to the doctors her father might go any time."

"He's a very old man, Mr. Fransemmery," said Mrs. Braxfield. "He was near sixty when he married the second time. However, whether he lasts long or little, Braxfield'll stop with him till the end."

"Good old faithful servant, Braxfield," observed Mr. Fransemmery. "Well—when he does retire, ma'am, you've got a very cozy nest for him to come to! Lucky man!—pleasant home, delightful surroundings, and—the handsomest woman in the South Country! Eh, ma'am?"

"Lord, Mr. Fransemmery, what a flatterer you are!" said Mrs. Braxfield with a conscious laugh. "Go away with you!—you'll be turning my head."

Mr. Fransemmery laughed too, and went. He had a trick of teasing people, and derived great pleasure from it; its exercise kept him in good spirits. He was in high good spirits now, and he began to whistle when he had passed Woodland Cottage and had stepped out on the open downs beyond. But before he had gone far across the springy turf his whistling stopped abruptly. Rounding a corner of the undulating surface Mr. Fransemmery suddenly saw that which made him pause. A hundred yards or so in front, a little to the left of the broad grass-covered foot-track which led from Markenmore Court to Mitbourne, a village on the further side of the downs, lay

a deep depression in the land, locally known as Markenmore Hollow. It was, in reality, a long-disused chalk pit of unusual extent, but since its workings had been given up, a hundred years previously, thick under-growth of gorse and bramble had accumulated there beneath a cluster of old Scotch fir, and the place was now a wilderness as lonely as it was wild. But it was not lonely at that moment. Standing by one of the Scotch firs, in close proximity to a great clump of gorse, were men—one of them, from his uniform, Mr. Fransemmery immediately recognized as the Markenmore village policeman; another, from his velveteen coat, as Sir Anthony Markenmore's gamekeeper; the third was a farm-labourer whom Mr. Fransemmery often met of a morning as the man crossed the downs on his way to work in the village.

But it was not the sight of these three men that made Mr. Fransemmery suddenly halt and stop his blithe whistle and catch his breath. He was familiar with the three men—to his eyes they were known. But as they moved, he saw that at their feet there was lying something that was unknown. That something looked like the figure of a man, supine, motionless, covered by some wrap, a coat or overcoat, thrown carefully across its immobility. And it was with a sudden sense of he scarcely knew what, that Mr. Fransemmery, grave and silent enough by that time, went down into the Hollow.

The village policeman, a sharp-eyed fellow, who had once confided to Mr. Fransemmery that he had ambitions and meant to rise in the force, came towards him. His face betokened a good deal, and he shook his head slightly as he put his fingers to his peaked cap.

"What's all this?" asked Mr. Fransemmery in a hushed voice. "Something wrong?"

"Something very wrong, sir," replied the policeman. He drew nearer, and turning, pointed to the shrouded figure. "Gentleman lying there dead, sir. Shot through the head!—but whether its murder or suicide, I can't say, sir. Murder I think—anyhow, there's no revolver lying near. And it's been a revolver."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Mr. Fransemmery. "Why—who was he?"

The policeman gave him a sharp look.

"I couldn't have said, sir," he replied. "I've only been here three years, so of course I don't know him. But these other two men, they do: Mr. Guy Markenmore, sir."

Mr. Fransemmery started.

"What!" he exclaimed. "Sir Anthony's elder son? You don't mean it."

"They say so, sir, and they know him well enough," answered the policeman. "That man, Hobbs, the ploughman, found him. He ran down to the keeper's cottage, and to me, and we came up at once. But before coming I telephoned to Selcater, and the Chief Constable himself is coming along—they said he was starting out then, with the doctor. Come and look at him, sir."

Mr. Fransemmery nerved himself to this sad task, and went nearer. The keeper and the labourer touched their caps; the policeman drew aside the cloak which the labourer had taken from his shoulders and laid over the dead man. And Mr. Fransemmery, wondering what all this meant, bent down.

Dead enough, he thought. And peaceful enough.

A calm, bloodless face, neither smile nor frown on it—nothing but a little drawing together of the finely marked eyebrows, a slightly puzzled expression. Otherwise, so still. . . .

“It must have been murder, sir,” whispered the policeman, “and at close quarters. Look there!—the skin over his temples slightly burnt. And——”

“They’re coming,” said the keeper suddenly. “Two or three of them.”

Mr. Fransemmery straightened himself and looked across the downs. A dog-cart, driven at considerable speed, was coming along the grass-track from the direction of Selcaster, the tall spire of whose cathedral showed above the woods which lay between the downs and the old city. In the gleam of the rapidly rising sun he caught the glint of the silver and blue uniform of the county police, and as the keeper had said, the dog-cart, driven by a policeman, seemed filled with men. And presently it raced up the sward to the lip of the hollow, and the Chief Constable, a military-looking man of middle age, jumped out and followed by two other men, one the police-surgeon, the other obviously a plain-clothes officer, came hurrying down to the little group beneath the Scotch firs. He nodded to Mr. Fransemmery, whom everybody in the district knew, and turned sharply on the village constable.

“Who found this man?” he asked quickly.

The ploughman came forward, with evident distaste.

“I did, sir!” he answered. “James Hobbs—work at Mr. Marrow’s.”

“When—and how?” asked the Chief Constable.

“About an hour ago, sir—maybe a bit more,” replied Hobbs. “I come this way to my work every

morning. I caught sight of him as I was passing the top there, and I came down to take a look at him. Then I saw he was dead, so I covered him up with my coat and ran along to the village to tell the policeman there."

"He was dead when you found him?" asked the Chief Constable.

"Made out he was dead enough, sir! I touched his hand and his face—stone cold they was, both of 'em."

The Chief Constable turned to the police-surgeon, who went forward and removed the cloak. He stooped down and made a hasty examination; then rose and spoke with decision.

"He's been dead from, I should say, two to three hours—perhaps a little longer," he said. "Shot dead—a revolver, presumably."

"Found anything of that sort?" asked the Chief Constable of the policeman.

"Nothing, sir. I've looked carefully all round. There's nothing."

"Murder then!" muttered the Chief Constable. He went nearer and looked intently at the dead man. "I suppose this is Mr. Guy Markenmore?" he said, glancing at the keeper and the policeman. "I've never seen him, you know—he'd left before I came to Seleaster."

"This is Guy Markenmore, without a doubt," said the police-surgeon. "I knew him well enough. He's very little altered, either. You knew him, too, of course," he continued, with a look at the keeper. "You can recognize him?"

"Oh, I know him, sir," exclaimed the keeper.

"That's Mr. Guy, right enough, that is! I'd know him anywhere—poor gentleman!"

The Chief Constable looked round. Markenmore Court caught his eye, lying amongst its elms and beeches three-quarters of a mile away across the shelving hill-side. He shook his head.

"This is a bad business," he muttered. "Who on earth should want to murder him? Been away for—seven years, isn't it? Well, he'll have to be removed, and we shall have to inform the coroner at once. Blick," he continued, turning to the plain-clothes man, "you take charge of this. Send down to the village for help—have the body brought down to the Court; the inquest can be held there. Let Hobbs there run down to the village—send Walshaw back in the dog-cart to Selcaster for the other policeman—and have all round here thoroughly examined for footmarks, and so on. Docter, will you stay by and come down with them to the Court when they're ready to remove him?—you'll no doubt want to make a more careful examination. Now then—we've got to break the news to the family. Mr. Fransemmery, I think you know them all pretty well—will you walk down with me? A painful duty, but it's got to be done."

Mr. Fransemmery bowed his head, and he and the Chief Constable set off at a smart pace across the downs. For awhile they walked in silence: the Chief Constable broke it.

"I understand that Sir Anthony's about at his last end," he said. "This—hello, what's that?"

The two men stopped, staring at each other. Then, with a mutual understanding, they turned

58 THE MARKENMORE MYSTERY

sharply towards the valley. From the tower of Markenmore Church came the deep, booming note of a bell; a moment passed and it was repeated.

“The minute bell!” muttered the Chief Constable.
“Then—Sir Anthony Markenmore’s gone!”

CHAPTER V

DENOUNCED

Listening, against their will, to the monotonous tolling of the death bell, the two men crossed the deep-set lane into which Mr. Fransemmery had tripped only an hour before in high spirits, never anticipating tragedy and gloom, and took their way across the sunlit park towards Markenmore Court. For awhile neither spoke: each was occupied with his own thoughts. But suddenly the Chief Constable turned to his companion.

"A remarkable thing, Mr. Fransemmery," he said, "that if Sir Anthony is dead—and I make no doubt of it, for there's nobody else in the village that they'd toll a minute bell for—he and his elder son should come to their deaths on the same morning! And now, I suppose, the title passes to Mr. Harry Markenmore—of course."

But Mr. Fransemmery had been thinking on lines of his own, and he shook his head.

"Maybe," he answered, as if in doubt.

"Aye?" said the Chief Constable. "But why maybe. He's the next, isn't he?"

"Well," replied Mr. Fransemmery. "Guy Markenmore, so I'm told, left home seven years ago, and has never been there since—I know that much. Now, the probabilities are that during those seven years,

Guy Markenmore married—it's likely, anyway. And in that case, if he'd a son, the title—and the estates, for I happen to know that the Markenmore property is strictly entailed—will pass to him. That, of course, will have to come out."

"A lot will have to come out," muttered the Chief Constable. "That Guy Markenmore has been murdered I haven't the least doubt! But why? Evidently he has returned to the old place—summoned to see his father, I should think—and here he's found shot dead, first thing in the morning! It will take some working out. Luckily, I had that man Blick in Selcaster when I heard the news, and I roused him out of his hotel, immediately, and brought him along."

"Who is Blick?" asked Mr. Fransemmerly.

"A C. I. D. man," replied the Chief Constable. "One of the smartest men they've got at New Scotland Yard just now—detective-sergeant already, and likely to rise still higher. He's been down in Selcaster for a day or two in connection with a case of fraud that's given us a lot of trouble—now I shall get him switched off on to this affair. From what I've seen of him already—and heard of him, previously—he's all the qualities of a human ferret."

"He'll need them, I think," remarked Mr. Fransemmerly. "There's all the semblance of some extraordinary mystery about this morning's work, and apparently no clue on the spot. But we may hear more presently."

They were now walking up the drive to the front of the house; as they came within a hundred yards of the terrace they saw a tall man emerge from the shrubberies, approach the front door and enter.

"I shouldn't wonder if that's Mr. John Harborough, of Greycloister, the big house on the other side of the village," said Mr. Fransemmery. "I heard from my housekeeper last night that he's come home at last. Like Guy Markenmore, he's been away a long time—the same time, indeed. Seven years—hunting, shooting big game, in all parts of the world. I've never met him and I suppose you haven't."

"Heard of him," replied the Chief Constable. "Belongs to the big banking firm—Harborough, Chettle, and Fairweather, doesn't he?"

"Yes, but it's as a sleeping partner," said Mr. Fransemmery. "He's never taken any active part in the business. A very rich man, I understand. Well, here we are—and I wish we came on any other matter than this."

The front door of Markenmore Court stood open, and just inside the inner hall the two new arrivals caught sight of a little group—the tall man they had just seen, an elderly man of professional appearance, and Braxfield.

"Here's Chilford, Sir Anthony's solicitor, here already," whispered the Chief Constable, as he and Mr. Fransemmery advanced without ceremony. "We'd better tell him before letting the boy and girl know. Fortunately I don't see either of them."

The three men in the hall gazed at the Chief Constable's semi-military uniform with evident astonishment; the elderly man came hastily forward. The Chief Constable gave him a warning look and got in the first word.

"Young people anywhere about, Chilford?" he asked. "No? Then let Braxfield take us into some room for a minute or two—to ourselves." He bent

and whispered in the solicitor's ear. "Some bad news."

Chilford stared as if unable to understand the communication; he in his turn whispered to Braxfield; the old butler threw open a door and ushered the group into a dimly-lighted room, one of the many in Markenmore Court that were rarely used. He was closing the door on them when the Chief Constable called him back.

"Don't go, Braxfield," he said. "Come in—close the door. Am I right in supposing that your old master's dead?" he continued, motioning the butler to join the group. "Mr. Fransemmerly and I heard the death bell, so we thought——"

"Sir Anthony died in his sleep early this morning, sir," replied Braxfield mournfully. "The exact time I couldn't say."

"Well, I want to ask you a question or two, Braxfield," continued the Chief Constable. "Was Mr. Guy Markenmore here?"

"Here, sir? When his father died? No—no, he was not."

"Has he been here? Was he here yesterday?"

"Mr. Guy Markenmore, sir—Sir Guy as he is now, to speak correct—was here last night. He was here for a while—left about half-past ten, sir."

"Left for where?"

"That I can't exactly say, sir. He had a call to make on some one in the neighbourhood, but I don't know who the person was. His intention, sir—Sir Guy's—was to catch the early morning train for London at Mitbourne."

The Chief Constable glanced at Mr. Fransemmerly.

"Markenmore Hollow is on the side of the downs"

path to Mitbourne," he whispered, in an aside. "You've not seen or heard of him since he went out of this house at ten-thirty, then, Braxfield?" he went on, turning again to the old butler. "Heard—nothing?"

"I, sir? No, sir. Neither seen nor heard."

"What is all this?" asked the solicitor suddenly. "Has something happened?"

"I'd better tell you straight out," answered the Chief Constable. He glanced at the door and lowered his voice. "I don't want the young people to be alarmed," he said. "You must break it gently to them, Chilford, as you're the family solicitor. The fact is, Guy Markenmore's body has been found, up there on the downs, at the place called Markenmore Hollow. He——"

Braxfield let out a sharp cry. His usually rosy face paled.

"Body!" he exclaimed. "Then——"

"Steady, my friend!" said the Chief Constable. "Keep calm! Yes—he's dead—and I'm afraid—in fact—there's no doubt about it—he's been murdered!"

Braxfield burst into tears. And Mr. Fransemmery, gently taking the old man by the arm, led him away into one of the deep window-places, soothing him. Meanwhile, the Chief Constable rapidly narrated the events of the morning to Chilford and Harborough. The solicitor's grave face grew still graver.

"You're sure—from what you've seen already—that it's a case of murder?" he asked at last.

"Haven't one doubt," affirmed the Chief Constable. "Murder! We shall have to go deeply into his doings, his whereabouts, between half-past ten

last night and early this morning. According to the police-surgeon he was shot about four o'clock. What was he doing?—where was he?—in that interval? You live in Markenmore, Chilford, don't you?"

"Outskirts," answered Chilford, "but he never came to see me, if that's what you're thinking of. I didn't know he'd been here, till just now."

"I suppose he didn't come to see you, Mr. Harborough?" asked the Chief Constable.

"No," said Harborough. "Certainly not."

"I thought you'd probably known each other before he left home," said the Chief Constable. "Well, there's a lot to do, Chilford; you'd better go and tell his brother and sister and prepare them. His body will be brought here—presently—and the inquest will be held here. Break it to them—they've got to know."

Chilford nodded, and silently left the room. Braxfield, wiping his eyes, came back.

"You'll excuse my emotion, gentlemen," he said. "Forty years' service in this family, you know—like my own, if I may say so. Come to the morning-room, gentlemen, if you please—there's a good fire there, by now; this room's never used, and it's too cold to stay in."

The three men followed the old butler across the hall to the room in which Harborough had talked to Harry and Valencia the previous evening. And there, escorted by Chilford, the brother and sister presently joined them. One glance at their faces made the Chief Constable turn to Mr. Fransemmery with a sigh of relief.

"Good!" he whispered. "Cool as cucumbers!"

Know how to control their feelings!—sure sign of old blood and good breeding that! That's your sort, Fransemmery—true stuff!"

Then, next minute, he found himself quietly explaining matters to Harry and Valencia, who listened attentively, taking in each of the preliminary details that he could give them.

"At present," he concluded, looking from one to the other, "the first thing is to find out where your brother was between half-past ten, when, I'm told by your butler, he left here, and early in the morning. You've no idea?"

"None," said Harry. "He told us nothing."

But Valencia shook her head.

"Scarcely that," she said. "He told us something. Don't you remember, Harry—just before he went?"

"Nothing definite," replied Harry. "I gained no definite idea, anyway."

"What did he tell you, Miss Markenmore?" inquired the Chief Constable.

"I remember perfectly," answered Valencia. "He said he must go, because he had a business appointment in the neighbourhood. He said that where he was going, supper would be ready for him. But—that was all."

"Not a hint as to where he was going—nor as to whom it was to see?"

"None!"

The group presently broke up into sections. Harbourough and Mr. Fransemmery drew off into one corner of the room; Chilford and Harry into another; the Chief Constable and Valencia remained on the hearth, talking in low tones. Suddenly the door was

thrown open, and Braxfield, still lachrymose, announced, in a half-whisper:

“Mrs. Tretheroe!”

Everybody looked round as Mrs. Tretheroe—who had not forgotten the conventions and presented herself in a tailor-made gown of dead black habit-cloth—came rapidly into the room and made for Valencia. But one man shared his observation between her and his immediate company: Mr. Fransmery, while giving Mrs. Tretheroe and her beauty a quick, admiring glance was sharp enough to see that at sight of her John Harborough not only started, but turned pale, and then red, and then pale again, compressing his firm lips. Another in the room saw all that, too—Valencia.

But Mrs. Tretheroe saw nothing—or seemed to see nothing. She was obviously excited; her cheek had more than its usual glow; her lips were slightly parted; she looked, thought at least three of the men there, as if she had come to receive congratulations rather than to offer condolence. But as she approached Valencia she moulded her mobile face into an expression of decorous sympathy.

“My poor Valencia!” she said in a soft, cooing voice. “Your dear father!—I came at once, the very moment I heard, to tell you and Harry how sorry I am, and to see what I could do. But—you’d expected it, hadn’t you?—and he was so very, very old, to be sure. And another thing—of course, you’ll let Sir Guy know at once—I—the fact is, Valencia, I saw Guy last night after—after I was here, you know—and—well, he’s altered his plans, and the address he gave you in London won’t find him for

a few days. But I know where to find him—and hadn't you better wire him at once? You see——"

She had run on so rapidly that neither Valencia nor any of the men had been able to get in a word. But now, as she was pulling out a scrap of paper from her muff, Harry Markenmore broke in, sharply.

"Stop her, somebody!" he said half-angrily. "Tell her!"

Chilford moved across to the hearth, holding up a hand.

"Mrs. Tretheroe!" he said quietly. "I—the fact is, you are not aware of what has occurred this morning. You'd better hear. It's not only that Sir Anthony is dead—his son is dead, too. He——"

"Look out!" exclaimed Mr. Fransemmerly, keenly watchful. "She's going to faint!"

The Chief Constable stretched out a hand. But Mrs. Tretheroe pushed it aside. She had turned pale to her lips; her eyes blazed as she fixed them on Chilford.

"Dead?" she said intensely. "Guy Markenmore! Dead! It's a lie!"

"Unfortunately, ma'am, it's the strict truth," retorted Chilford, as if a little nettled, and not a little scornful. "Mr. Guy Markenmore was found dead this morning, on the way between here and Mitbourne, and there's no doubt that he was murdered."

Mrs. Tretheroe gasped and started back against the big table that filled the centre of the room. Leaning heavily against it she lifted a hand towards her throat, as if something began to choke her. Her eyes, growing wild and desperate, fixed themselves on one face after another; finally they rested on Harbor-

ough, who was watching her intently. And then, with a cry that was half a scream, she lifted her hand still higher, pointing at him.

"Murdered?" she said. "Guy!—murdered? Then—then—there's the man who murdered him!—I know it! Dare to say you didn't, John Harborough!—you know you did! You threatened—seven years ago—to kill him whenever, wherever, you and he next met—and now—now—you've done it! Guy?—dead?—I—oh, God—I—I promised—last night—only a few hours ago—to—to marry him! We—Valencia!—we were going to be married—at once!"

"Now she is fainting!" muttered Mr. Fransemery. "Good God!—what revelations!"

He started forward as Mrs. Tretheroe, with a sharp moan, slid heavily to the ground; with the help of Chilford and Valencia he got her out of the room, and sent Braxfield for the housekeeper. Leaving her and Valencia with Mrs. Tretheroe, he and Chilford went back to the other three men. The Chief Constable, his hands behind him, was leaning against the big mantelpiece; Harborough, very white, faced him from the other side of the table; Harry Markenmore stood a little way off, glancing doubtfully from one to the other.

"An awkward—but a decidedly definite accusation, Mr. Harborough," the Chief Constable was saying. "She seemed to have no hesitation in making it!"

"You saw that she made it in a moment of intense excitement," said Harborough. "And of—of grief."

"It's precisely in these moments—in my experience—that truth gets blurted out," observed the Chief Constable drily. "However, as she said it before the lot of us, perhaps you'll tell me something

for your own sake. Did you ever make such a threat as that she spoke of?—did you ever threaten to kill Guy Markenmore, whenever and wherever you next met?”

Chilford gave a dry, deprecatory cough.

“I’m not Mr. Harborough’s solicitor,” he said, “but if I were, I should strongly advise him not to answer that question, Chief Constable. You know.”

“This isn’t a court of law,” retorted the Chief Constable. “It’s a private conversation between gentlemen. As Mrs. Tretheroe said what she did before us, Mr. Harborough has the right to say his say—before us.”

“I will say!” exclaimed Harborough suddenly. “I did make such a threat—years ago. It was made under great provocation—the greatest provocation. But—all that’s died out, long since—I mean the feeling of anger—and so on—has died out in me. If I’d met Guy Markenmore, now—or any time these last four or five years—I’d have shaken hands with him.”

“Good!” said the Chief Constable. He pointed to Harry, and looked at Harborough. “For his—and his sister’s—satisfaction,” he went on, “tell me—when did you last see Guy Markenmore?”

Harborough, too, looked at Harry. And as he looked, Valencia came back into the room. He turned towards her.

“I’ll tell you,” he said quietly. “I’ve never set eyes on Guy Markenmore for seven years. I know nothing whatever of the circumstances of his death—nothing!”

The Chief Constable nodded; the other men made no remark. But Valencia looked at Harborough

steadily for a moment; he, too, looked at her; it seemed to Mr. Fransemmery's keenly watchful eyes that a glance of intelligence passed between them. Then she went up to her brother, tapped him on the arm, and turned to the Chief Constable.

"Aren't there things to be done?—preparations to make?" she asked. "Will you tell me about them?"

The Chief Constable went off with the brother and sister; Harborough went away, too, without further word; Chilford and Mr. Fransemmery were left alone. Presently they walked out on the terrace, and began to pace up and down, at first in silence.

"I imagine," said Mr. Fransemmery at last, "that what we heard just now from Mrs. Tretheroe originally arose out of some early love-affair? I suppose Harborough and Guy Markenmore were rivals, eh?"

"Everybody knows that, my dear sir!" answered Chilford. "When Mrs. Tretheroe was Veronica Leighton—her father was Vicar of Markenmore, you know—she was a decided and incorrigible flirt, and she'd no end of young men running after her. But these two were first in the running, and I've always felt that it was through her, and because of her, that both of them left home as they did. She either married old Colonel Tretheroe out of pique, or for his money—money, I should say. There's some mystery about what happened at that time—some strange mystery that's never been made clear."

"And now there's another!" said Mr. Fransemmery. "And—she seems to be in it."

"Aye!" observed the solicitor with a dry laugh. "She let things out just now. But Markenmore was with her last night. Now, where?—and how long?"

Mr. Fransemmery made no reply. He had caught sight of something, and he lifted a hand, pointing to it. The men carrying Guy Markenmore's dead body were just emerging from the fringe of wood.

CHAPTER VI

THE CORONER SITS

Two days later, Mr. Fransemmery summoned to discharge the functions of a juror at that ancient institution, a Coroner's inquest, found himself acting as foreman of twelve good men and true in the old dining-hall of Markenmore Court. That venerable apartment had been specially prepared and fitted up for the occasion; it was the first time, observed Braxfield mournfully, that it had ever been used since the grand state dinner which Sir Anthony had given to his friends and neighbours when Guy came of age. It was a room of vast size: baronial in appearance, and in its time there had been many gay and striking scenes in it. But never, since its first building by a dead and gone Markenmore, had it been so filled with folk of various degree as on this bright spring morning. There were jurymen and police and witnesses; there was Chilford, representing the family, and another solicitor representing Harborough; there was a London barrister in charge of the case as it presented itself to the authorities; there were officials of many sorts; there were reporters from the local Press, and two or three representatives sent specially from London newspapers. But all these were as nothing to the crowd of spectators—village folk; county family folk; folk from near and far.

Already, decided Mr. Fransemmery, as he adjusted his gold-rimmed spectacles and looked around him, the Markenmore problem bade fair to be a *cause célèbre*.

Mr. Fransemmery at that moment could truly say that he and his fellow-jurymen brought open, unbiassed, and uninformed minds to that important enquiry. During the forty-eight (to be exact, fifty-two) hours which had elapsed since the discovery of Guy Markenmore's dead body, nothing further had leaked out to the general public. Much had been going on. Police had been drafted into the usually quiet village in considerable numbers; they had been searching woods, towns, all the immediate surroundings of the crime. Blick, with two or three lesser satellites, had been pursuing enquiries all round the neighbourhood; there was scarcely a soul in a side area round Markenmore that had not been questioned for news.

But all through these investigations those who made them had preserved an unusually strict silence, and outside the police there was not a soul in the big dining-hall, now transformed into a court, who had the faintest notion of what was about to be revealed. Yet one thing was known. Mrs. Tretheroe had not been content with her denunciation of John Harborough before the brother and sister and the men assembled in the morning-room. She had denounced him again—to the Vicar; to the village folk; to other people; it was already well and widely known that she firmly believed that Harborough had killed Guy Markenmore. Naturally, therefore, she was the object of great interest as she sat near the big tables arranged in the centre of the room, attired,

somewhat theatrically, in deep mourning. She was not alone; although her house-party had dispersed on the day of the tragedy, two of her friends had remained with her; one, a Mrs. Hamilton, a middle-aged woman of fashion: the other, a Baron von Eckhardstein, a handsome and well-preserved man of fifty who was said to be a great European financier. These two sat on either side of Mrs. Tretheroe; a little distance away Harborough sat, grave and imperturbable, by the side of Mr. Walkinshaw, his solicitor.

Mr. Fransemmerly and his eleven companions went automatically through the usual dismal preliminaries: and the gruesome duty of viewing the dead man's body. They listened respectfully to the Coroner's opening remarks, conscious all the time that this was routine—the real thing to be considered was the evidence. And suddenly the Coroner brought his remarks to an abrupt conclusion, and jury and spectators settled down to the real business—the hearing of what could be said towards clearing up, one way or another, the all-important problem: Who killed Guy Markenmore?

The first stages of the enquiry yielded little that was new or exciting. Harry Markenmore identified the body as that of his elder brother, Guy, who, he said, was thirty-five years of age. He was not aware if Guy was married or not. Guy had left Markenmore Court seven years before, and had never been seen or heard of by his family since, until the evening before the murder, when he had turned up unexpectedly. He detailed the doings of the short visit, and said that his brother had left the house at about half-past ten. He had spoken of having an appoint-

ment in the neighbourhood, and had mentioned that supper would be awaiting him where he was going. He had no idea whatever as to where Guy then went. He did not return to Markenmore Court—no one there ever saw him again until his dead body was carried in, early next morning.

Hobbs, the ploughman, gave evidence as to finding the dead man, whom he had at once recognized, and detailed what he had done to get assistance. He had seen no one about in that part of the downs, nor noticed anything suspicious near the scene of the crime.

The village policeman spoke as to the investigations made round about Markenmore Hollow: there was no sign whatever of any struggle, and there were no footprints—the turf, thereabouts, he said, was very wiry, close-knit, and full of spring: there had been no recent rain, and the closest examination had failed to yield anything in the shape of such prints. No weapon of any sort had been found near the place, nor in the adjacent undergrowth. This witness, too, gave evidence as to the examination of the dead man's clothing, made when the body was brought down to the Court. There was a considerable sum of money in notes, gold, and silver. There was a gold watch, chain, and locket. There were three rings—two of them set with diamonds. There were several small items—a silver cigar-case, silver match-box, and so on; and there were two pocket-books. All these were now in possession of the police. He was sure that, when he was brought to the Hollow by the last witness, the body had not been interfered with in any way, and that the clothing, and the various objects he had just mentioned, had not been touched.

From these facts and from the additional fact that the dead man had a large sum of money on him, he had at once formed the impression that the murder had not been committed for the sake of robbery.

There was more interest in the evidence of the police-surgeon. It was, he said, about twenty minutes to seven o'clock when he, with the Chief Constable and Detective-Sergeant Blick, reached Markenmore Hollow. He saw at once that Guy Markenmore had been shot dead, and his impression was that he had then been dead between two or three hours—nearer three than two. His opinion remained unaltered—he should fix the actual time of death at about four o'clock. Death had been instantaneous. From a subsequent post-mortem examination he had ascertained that the bullet—produced—fired, in his opinion, at close quarters from a revolver, had entered the head at the right temple, passed through the brain in a curving downward direction and finally lodged in the muscles a little below the left ear.

"This," suggested the Coroner, "could have been a self-inflicted wound?"

"Certainly," replied the witness.

"But in that case, the weapon would have been found close at hand?"

"In that case, I should have expected to find him still grasping the weapon. The probability in such case is that a man who shoots himself grips his revolver very tightly in the act, and his fingers would tighten their grip as the shot took effect."

"As there was no revolver near, you came to the conclusion that this was a case of murder?"

"Yes—murder!"

"Did you come to any conclusion as to how it was done?"

"Yes, I did. An opinion, that is, I think that the murderer and his victim were walking side by side, probably in close conversation, the victim on the left. I think the murderer brought his right hand, armed with a revolver, suddenly round across his own body, and shot his victim at literally close quarters, the victim being absolutely unconscious that he was to be attacked. The revolver must have been placed close to the temple—the skin and the fine hair about it were burnt."

The Coroner looked round at the jury.

"The sun rises at about ten minutes to five, just now," he observed. "At four o'clock, then, it would be fairly light. This is an important point, gentlemen. You must keep it in mind, in view of what you have just heard."

None of the legal practitioners had any questions to put to the police-surgeon; he stepped down, and a whispered consultation took place between the Coroner and one of his officials. Then came the moment for which the crowded court had waited with suppressed eagerness.

"Mrs. Veronica Tretheroe!"

Mrs. Tretheroe rose from between her supporting friends, and walked slowly forward to the witness-box. Evidently well coached as to what she was to do, she drew off the glove from her right hand and threw back her thick veil. Taking the Testament in her ungloved hand she repeated the words of the oath in a low voice, and turned a very pale, but perfectly self-possessed face on the Coroner, who bent towards her with an expression of sympathetic consid-

eration. Amidst a dead silence he began his preliminary questions.

"Mrs. Tretheroe, I believe you knew the late Mr. Guy Markenmore?"

"Yes."

"You knew him well, one may say?"

"Yes—very well—once!"

"How long had you known him?"

"I knew him from the time my father came to Markenmore, as vicar of this parish, when I was a girl of seventeen or eighteen, until Guy left this house, about seven years ago."

"How old were you then, Mrs. Tretheroe?"

"Twenty-two."

"Then your acquaintanceship with him at that period lasted about four or five years?"

"About that."

"You were then Miss Veronica Leighton?"

"Yes."

"I think you married the late Colonel Tretheroe just after Mr. Guy Markenmore left home—seven years ago?"

"Yes."

"And went with your husband to India?"

"I did."

"You have only recently returned from India—where Colonel Tretheroe, I think, died last year?"

"Quite recently."

The Coroner leaned a little forward from his desk—sure sign, thought Mr. Fransemmery, that his questions were nearing a most particular stage.

"Now. Mrs. Tretheroe, during those seven years, did you ever see Guy Markenmore?"

"Never!"

"Did you ever hear from him?"

"Never!—nor of him!"

"For seven years you neither saw him, nor heard of him, nor heard from him. When did you next see him again?"

"On Monday evening last—two—or three—days ago."

"You met him—for the first time for seven years?"

"Yes, for the first time for seven years."

"Just tell me, Mrs. Tretheroe, how the meeting came about?"

Mrs. Tretheroe folded her hands on the ledge of the witness-box and distributed her glances alternately between the Coroner and the twelve jurymen. By that time she had regained her colour; her eyes had begun to sparkle; she looked as if she was beginning to feel some extraordinary interest in the proceedings.

"In this way," she said, in quiet, even tones. "During Monday evening, after dinner, I had occasion to give some orders to my coachman, Burton. When he was going away, he mentioned that he had just seen Mr. Guy Markenmore; he had seen him, he said, going up to the Court. I thought Burton must be mistaken, but he was positive—and, of course, I knew he had known Guy since boyhood. So——"

Here Mrs. Tretheroe paused. Her fingers began to tap the ledge before her; she looked at the Coroner and the jury with a slightly embarrassed expression.

"What happened, if you please?" asked the Coroner in matter-of-fact tones.

"Well—I wanted to see Guy!" continued Mrs. Tretheroe suddenly. "And so—not just then, but

after a while—about half-past ten, I think—I put on a coat over my dinner dress and ran across the park to the Court—there's a path, a short cut. I came here—I saw Braxfield, the butler, and Valencia Markenmore. I told Valencia that I'd heard Guy had come home. She said he'd gone. Then I thought that, perhaps, hearing I was at the Dower House, he'd come down there to see me, so I went away, thinking I might find him waiting for me."

"Did you find him?"

"No—but—I met him. He had been to my house. I met him at the gate."

"What happened then?"

"He went back to my house with me."

"I believe you were entertaining a house-party, Mrs. Tretheroe?"

"Yes."

"A large one?"

"Eight, altogether."

"Did you introduce Mr. Guy Markenmore to your guests when you took him in?"

"No, I didn't. They were playing bridge, some of them—some were playing billiards. He didn't see any of them."

"Where did you and he go, in your house?"

"We went up to my boudoir."

The Coroner leaned still nearer.

"We have heard—from Sir Harry Markenmore—that his brother spoke of an appointment, which he hurried away to keep? Now—was that appointment with you?"

"No—certainly not!"

"Did he mention any appointment to you?"

"Yes—merely to say that he had one—close by."

"Close by? Did he say with whom, or where?"

"No, he did not. He merely mentioned the fact—easually. I didn't question him about it."

"And—how long did he stay with you at the Dower House?"

Mrs. Tretheroe hesitated—obviously, not from uncertainty.

"The question is a highly important one," said the Coroner.

"Well, he stayed until a quarter to twelve," answered Mrs. Tretheroe.

"Then he was with you about an hour?"

"About an hour—yes."

"Alone—all the time?"

"Yes."

"Did any of your guests—or any of your servants—see him, coming or going?"

"No one saw him. He and I entered the house by a side door, of which I have the key always in my possession. We went straight up to my boudoir. I let him out of the house in the same way. No—nobody saw him."

"You let Guy Markenmore out of your house, yourself, at a quarter to twelve. Did you notice which way he went when he left?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact, I walked down the drive with him, to the entrance gate. He went along the main road, towards the village."

"And, after that, you never saw him again?"

Mrs. Tretheroe shook her head, and for a moment those about her thought that she was about to burst into tears. But she suddenly controlled herself, and there was an almost defiant expression in her eyes as she answered the last question.

"I never saw him again—until I saw him yesterday dead—murdered!"

The Coroner drew back in his chair: clearly, he had got at what he particularly wanted to know: the glance that he gave the jurymen was obviously intended to remind them that they now knew that from half-past ten to a quarter to twelve o'clock of the night before his death Guy Markenmore had been with Mrs. Tretheroe, alone in her boudoir, unknown to any one. From the jury he turned to the men of law, sitting at the table beneath his raised desk.

The barrister who had been instructed by the police authorities slowly rose to his feet, and turned himself to the witness.

"I believe it is pretty well known, Mrs. Tretheroe," he said in bland, half-apologetic tones, "that before your marriage to your late husband, you had a good many suitors."

"Yes!" answered Mrs. Tretheroe readily. "At least—I don't know what you mean by well known. But I had—certainly."

"Mr. Guy Markenmore was one of them?"

"Yes."

"A particularly favoured one?"

"Well—yes, I think so."

"There was, in fact, at one time, some prospect of marriage between you?"

"We were certainly very fond of each other."

"We will pass from that for the moment—nothing came of it then. You married Colonel Tretheroe. But, I may take it, you—you still retained some of the old feeling for Guy Markenmore."

Mrs. Tretheroe hesitated. When she spoke again, her voice was lower in tone.

"I—I didn't know of it until—until I met him again, the other night," she said.

"But, you realized it then?"

"I suppose I did. I was very pleased to see him."

"And he to meet you again, I suppose?"

"Yes—indeed he was."

"Now, Mrs. Tretheroe, in the interest of justice, we want to get at the truth. When Guy Markenmore was with you alone, in your house, on Monday night, did he ask you to marry him?"

"Yes—he did."

"And you replied—what?"

"I promised him that I would," answered Mrs. Tretheroe.

CHAPTER VII

MRS. BRAXFIELD SUPPORTS

Amidst the ripple of murmured interest that ran round the room, the questioner looked significantly at the twelve jurymen, as much as to tell them to keep their ears well open; from them he turned once more to his witness.

"You accepted his offer of marriage, then. Did you arrange when it was to be?"

"Yes, we did."

"When?"

"Almost at once. For this reason—he told me that he was obliged to go over to New York on most important business within the next week or two. I decided to go with him. So we arranged that he should get a special license and we would be married straight off."

"Any particular date?"

"Yes. Next Monday morning—at Southampton."

"We may take it, then, that you and Guy Markemore, as old lovers, on meeting once more, and you being free, fell in love with each other again, and decided to marry without further delay?"

"Yes—I suppose so."

"Very well. Now, Mrs. Tretheroe, I want you to let your mind go back to the days when you were Miss Leighton. You have admitted that you had a

good many suitors. Is it not a fact that out of the many there were two young gentlemen of this neighbourhood who were specially favoured by you, and that one was Mr. Guy Markenmore, and the other Mr. John Harborough, of Greyeloister?"

Mrs. Tretheroe showed no hesitation in answering this question.

"They came first—in those days—certainly," she admitted.

"So much so, that it was commonly said, hereabouts, that you couldn't make up your mind between them?"

"I daresay that was said."

"Now, how was it that, in the end, you didn't marry either, but did marry somebody else?"

"There were reasons."

"What reasons? All this is important to the issue before the jury. What were the reasons?"

"Well—they became terribly jealous of each other. From being great friends they became bitter enemies. Or, rather, Harborough conceived a terrible, wicked enmity towards Guy. Harborough got an idea that Guy had poisoned my mind against him."

"Had Guy Markenmore poisoned your mind?"

"No, he had not! But Harborough was always jealous and suspicious, and he became so—so violent about things that—well, I dismissed him."

"And—what then as regards his rival?"

Mrs. Tretheroe began to finger her rings.

"Well," she answered after a pause. "I—the fact is, I got a bit sick of the squabble, so I told Guy it wouldn't do—and I accepted Colonel Tretheroe."

"I see. You got rid of both the youthful suitors, and married one who was older and more sensible.

Very good. But now, Mrs. Tretheroe, I think something had happened before that. You said just now that Harborough conceived a terrible, wicked enmity towards Guy Markenmore. Now, is it a fact that Harborough threatened his rival in your presence?"

"Yes—it is."

"When? On what occasion?"

"It was one day when he met Guy and myself coming home from hunting. There was a scene—high words, Harborough lost his temper. He told Guy that he'd settle him. And I know for a fact that he afterwards threatened him again—he said he'd kill him."

"How do you know that for a fact?"

"Because Guy told me of it."

"Was he afraid of Harborough?"

"I think he was. Harborough had a very black, ugly temper—when crossed."

"And he threatened to kill his rival because of—what, exactly?"

"Well, as I said just now, he'd got it into his head that Guy had said things about him to me, and that his chances with me had been destroyed by that."

"Then I take it that Harborough, at that period, had asked you to marry him?"

Mrs. Tretheroe arched her eyebrows in a glance of surprise.

"Lots of times!" she answered. "He was always asking me to marry him."

"And—did you give him any decided answer?"

"I don't know about decided answer. At one time—perhaps I would: then I used to think that I

wouldn't. No—I don't think I ever said I would or I wouldn't, definitely."

"And all this time, I suppose, Guy Markenmore was in the running, also."

"Yes."

"Was he asking you to marry him, too?"

"Oh, yes. They were always teasing me—both of them."

"And in the end Harborough got the idea that his rival was undermining him?"

"Yes—he certainly did. He said so."

"And later—you—shall we say, dismissed both, and accepted Colonel Tretheroe?"

"Yes."

"Did you ever see either of them again after becoming engaged to Colonel Tretheroe?"

"I never saw Guy Markenmore. I saw Harborough once. I met him one afternoon, near here, accidentally."

"Anything take place?"

"Yes. He went into one of his passions. He reproached me bitterly. He said I'd led him on for three years and then thrown him aside. And he finished up by repeating that he knew he'd Guy Markenmore to thank for it, and that if he ever came across him again, however long it might be, he'd shoot him like a dog."

When the sensation caused by this reply had died down, the questioner gave Mrs. Tretheroe a searching look.

"You swear that he said this—on your oath?"

"On my oath!"

"Harborough said—to you—that it was due to

Guy Markenmore that he, Harborough, had lost his chance with you, and that if he ever met Guy again, however long it might be, he'd shoot him like a dog?"

"Yes. That is precisely what he said."

"I take it, then, that at that time Harborough was passionately in love with you?"

"Madly, I believe!" murmured Mrs. Tretheroe.

"He acted like a madman. I was afraid of him."

"When this threat was made had Guy Markenmore gone away from here?"

"Oh, yes—some little time before."

"And did Harborough go soon after?"

"He went away a few days before I was married."

"Now, during the seven years of your marriage—six years, rather, I think—did you ever meet Harborough?"

"Never!"

"Ever hear from him?"

"No."

"Or of him?"

"I heard—just once—from a friend of mine in Seleaster that he was still travelling abroad, and that Greycloister had then been shut up for some years."

"Very well. In time your husband died, and you came back to England and took the Dower House here. And last Monday Mr. Harborough returned to Greycloister. Now, Mrs. Tretheroe, I want to ask you a most important question. Did you meet John Harborough last Monday?"

A dead silence fell on the room. For Mrs. Tretheroe hesitated in her answer. Every neck was craned forward. At last she spoke.

"Yes!"

"Where?—and at what time?"

"Just outside his own gates, at Greycloister, about five o'clock in the afternoon."

"Were you alone?"

"I was. I had gone out for a short walk by myself, with my dogs."

"The meeting was accidental?"

"Certainly. I had no idea he'd come home."

"Was there any—shall we call it embarrassment?"

"Well, yes. I was surprised. He seemed taken aback—agitated. Of course we shook hands and talked a little. Mere talk."

"Any reference to your former relations?"

"No."

"Just a mere polite exchange of—nothing in particular?"

"Just that. But he asked if—or, rather, when—he might come and see me."

"And what did you reply?"

"I replied—well, that he might come whenever he liked. What else could I reply?"

"He knew that you were free?—that Colonel Tretheroe was dead?"

"Oh, yes—I mentioned that myself."

"And then, I suppose, you parted?"

"Yes."

"Where did you next see him?"

"On the following morning, in the morning-room here, when I came in to offer my condolences about Sir Anthony, and heard that Guy was dead."

"And I believe that you immediately denounced John Harborough as his murderer?"

"I did."

The barrister paused in his examination, hesitated

a while; and then, as if satisfied, suddenly dropped back in his seat, and pulling out a snuff-box, tapped it thoughtfully before helping himself to a substantial pinch. A murmur of excitement had run round the spectators when Mrs. Tretheroe gave her last decided answer; it had scarcely died away before Harborough's solicitor, Mr. Walkinshaw, rose at the table. He looked fixedly at the witness.

"I want to ask you a very pointed question," he said. "And I want a very definite answer. Do you honestly believe that Mr. John Harborough killed Guy Markenmore? Think!"

"I have thought!" retorted Mrs. Tretheroe defiantly. "I do!"

"You believe that Mr. Harborough nursed his desire for revenge—if he ever really had any—for seven years, and took the first opportunity of gratifying it?"

"I think he shot Guy Markenmore," said Mrs. Tretheroe, with some show of sullenness.

"You think that Mr. Harborough returned home still in love with you? Answer!"

"I think it's possible. He used to swear that he could never love anybody else. And he certainly hadn't married."

"I will put this to you. Mr. Harborough met you on Monday afternoon. Let us suppose that all his old passion was revived at the mere sight of you—let us suppose, still further, that he made up his mind to once more become a suitor for your hand. Do you think it very likely that he would begin matters by shooting a man?"

"I'm not going to suppose anything. I believe he

did shoot Guy. They met—accidentally—and Harborough shot him.”

“You are a ready hand at making assertions, Mrs. Tretheroe! You calmly assert they met. What! at four o’clock in the morning—at Markenmore Hollow?”

Mrs. Tretheroe looked round. Up to then she had confined her occasional glances to the Coroner and the jury, but this time she took a comprehensive view of the crowded room. And as she turned to face Mr. Walkinshaw again, it was with a smile that signified contempt for his insinuation.

“I know that John Harborough was up there at Markenmore Hollow at four o’clock that morning,” she retorted boldly. “And, I know, too, that he was seen!”

Walkinshaw paused, abruptly. He looked round at his client; so, too, did everybody in the room. Once more a murmur of surprise rippled round. Walkinshaw went back to Harborough, who sat unmoved and silent; the solicitor whispered rapidly to him; Harborough did no more than nod, almost unconcernedly. A moment later Mrs. Tretheroe had been dismissed from the witness-box and another witness had been called into it.

“Elizabeth Braxfield!”

Mr. Fransemmerly and his eleven companions felt a new interest arise in their hearts as they stared at the ex-landlady of the Sceptre. Eleven of them were already wondering what she could tell. But Mr. Fransemmerly, knowing what he did of Mrs. Braxfield’s early habits, began to anticipate.

The Coroner left the examination of this witness to

the barrister who appeared for the police authorities. He lost no time in getting to the point.

"I believe, Mrs. Braxfield, that you were formerly Mrs. Wrenne, of the Sceptre Inn, and that before you were Mrs. Wrenne, you were a Miss Rawlings, a daughter of Thomas Rawlings, who kept the Sceptre Inn before your late husband, Peter Wrenne, had it?"

"Quite correct, sir," answered Mrs. Braxfield.

"Then you have lived all your life in Markenmore, and know all the people in it?"

"Yes, sir—and for a good many miles round."

"Do you know Mr. John Harborough?"

"Yes, sir—known him ever since he was a boy."

"Did you see him on Tuesday morning last?"

"I did."

"What time?"

"Ten minutes past four o'clock."

"Where?"

"Near my house, sir."

"Where is your house?"

"Up on the downs, sir—Woodland Cottage; about two hundred yards from Markenmore Hollow."

"How came you to see him—or anybody—at that early hour?"

"Nothing unusual in that, sir. I often get up at four o'clock—that is when the mornings get light. I keep a lot of fowls, and I get up to attend to them."

"Was it light that morning—Tuesday?"

"Light enough, sir."

"Light enough to see—how far?"

"Well, sir, when I looked out of my window I could see a lot. The Court here—the village—all that's in front—and Withersley Beacon on one side

and Pole Clump on the other. The morning was a particularly clear one—very fine.”

“And you saw Mr. Harborough?”

“I did, sir.”

“From your window?”

“From my window.”

“Where was he when you saw him?”

“Coming down the hill-side from the direction of Markenmore Hollow, sir. He was walking along the side of a fence.”

“How far away from you?”

“About a hundred yards.”

“Mr. Harborough, until the day before, had been away from Markenmore for seven years. Weren’t you very much surprised to see him there?”

“No, sir, I wasn’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’d heard that he’d got home again—heard it the night before. I’d been down to the village and everybody knew he’d got home.”

“And you are certain that the man you saw was Mr. Harborough?”

“Perfectly certain, sir. I couldn’t be mistaken about that.”

“Well, where did he go?”

“Down the slope in the direction of his house, sir—Greycloisters.”

“How far is Greycloisters from Woodland Cottage?”

“Half a mile, sir.”

“Was Mr. Harborough walking quickly when you saw him?”

“No, sir—he was just going along at the ordinary pace—sauntering, you might say.”

"And you are sure of your time—ten minutes past four o'clock in the morning?"

"Certain, sir. I have a very good clock in my bedroom—never gains or loses. I looked at it just before I saw Mr. Harborough."

The barrister nodded to Mrs. Braxfield and sat down, and as no one else rose to ask her any questions she left the box. The Coroner bent over to some officials; while he was whispering with them, Walkinshaw rose and approached the table again.

"Mr. Harborough desires to go into that box and give evidence, sir," he said. "I suggest that now—following upon the evidence you have just heard—is a favourable stage for hearing him."

The Coroner, an elderly man, leant back in his chair, took off his spectacles, and glanced at Walkinshaw and from him to his client.

"I suppose that Mr. Harborough fully understands that he is not bound to answer any questions that—answered in a certain fashion—might incriminate him?" he suggested. "Of course, if he wishes to make a statement."

"What my client desires to do, sir," interrupted Walkinshaw, "is to tell you and the jury the plain truth about himself and his movements in relation to this enquiry. He has nothing to conceal and he has everything to gain by telling the truth."

"Very well," said the Coroner. "Let us have his evidence now."

Walkinshaw turned to Harborough and motioned him to go into the box.

CHAPTER VIII

THE INCRIMINATING LETTER

But before Harborough reached the witness-box a new development arose. The Chief Constable who, since Mrs. Tretheroe stepped down, had been in close conversation with the detective, Blick, left his seat and going over to the barrister who had examined her, made some whispered communication to him. Presently the barrister rose and turned to the Coroner.

"If, as I understand, sir, Mr. Harborough wishes to make a statement, which, I suppose, will amount to giving evidence about his movements on the morning of Guy Markenmore's death," he said, "I should like to suggest that before you hear it you should take the evidence of Detective-Sergeant Blick, who has had this case in hand since the discovery of the crime. Sergeant Blick will produce some evidence on which I should like to examine Mr. Harborough. I submit that this course will be most convenient to everybody, especially to Mr. Harborough himself and to his legal adviser."

The Coroner looked at Walkinshaw, who bowed his assent.

"Let us have Detective-Sergeant Blick, then," said the Coroner.

In company with the rest of the people there he looked with some curiosity at the detective as he

stepped into the box. Most of the folk present in that room had never seen a detective in their lives. Blick, they thought, was certainly not at all like what they had conceived men of his calling to be. He might be thirty years old, but he looked younger. He had a somewhat cherubic, boyish countenance, rendered more juvenile still by the fact that he was clean-shaven; he was very smartly and fashionably dressed in a blue serge suit, traversed by thin lines of a lighter blue; his linen and neck-wear proclaimed him a bit of a dandy; his carefully brushed hair, golden in hue, matched admirably with the pretty glow of his cheeks; his bright blue eyes, keen and alert, were as striking as the firm lines of his lips and the square, determined chin beneath them. Altogether, Blick looked more like a smart young army officer than a policeman, and the people who had gained their notions of detectives from sentimental fiction began to feel that somebody had deceived them.

Blick and the barrister confronted each other with glances of mutual understanding.

"Detective-Sergeant Charles Blick, of the Criminal Investigation Department, New Scotland Yard, I believe," said the barrister.

"I am," answered Blick.

"Tell the Court how you came to be associated with this case."

"I came down to Selcaster some days ago, in connection with another matter," said Blick. "I had to remain in the city—at the Mitre Hotel. On Tuesday morning, very early, the Chief Constable sent an officer of his force to me, saying that he had

just received news of a probable murder at a place close by, and asking me to dress and go with him. I drove with him, the police-surgeon, and a constable, to Markenmore Hollow. There we found the dead body of a man whom some of those present recognized as Mr. Guy Markenmore. The Chief Constable requested me to take charge of matters; since then he has obtained permission from my Department for me to take this case in hand."

"With a view of finding the murderer?"

"With that object, certainly."

"You have heard the evidence of the previous witnesses, Blick?—I refer especially to that of Hobbs, of the Markenmore policeman, and of the doctor?"

"I have."

"All correct."

"Quite correct."

"After taking charge of matters, did you accompany the body here to Markenmore Court?"

"I did."

"Did you then make an examination of the clothing?"

"Yes; a thorough one."

"What did you find?"

"A purse containing seventy-five pounds in notes and gold—mostly five-pound notes. Five pounds, twelve shillings, and ninepence in gold, silver, and bronze, loose, in the trousers pockets; a silver cigar-case; a silver cigarette-case; a silver card-case; a——"

The Coroner leaned forward.

"A moment, if you please," he said. "It just strikes me—up to now, nobody has afforded us any

information as to where Mr. Guy Markenmore lived in London. So—is there any address on the cards which were presumably found in the case which the witness mentions?”

The barrister held up some cards.

“I have the cards here, sir,” he answered. “There are several in the case—some of them have a private address, some a business address. The private address is 847b Down Street, Piccadilly: the business address is 56 Folgrave Court, Cornhill. I may say—it can be given in evidence if necessary—that the police have made enquiries at both these addresses. At Down Street Mr. Guy Markenmore had a bachelor flat, which he had tenanted for some four or five years. He had a valet there, one Alfred Butcher, who had been in his service for three years. At Folgrave Court, he had a staff of three clerks——”

“What was Mr. Guy Markenmore’s profession, or business?” asked the Coroner.

“He was a member of the Stock Exchange, sir, of six years’ standing. As I have just said, the police have made enquiry at his flat and at his office. They learnt nothing particular at either, except that on Monday last Mr. Guy Markenmore, then in his usual health and good spirits, told his valet and his head-clerk that he was going into the country that afternoon, but would be back at the flat for breakfast next morning and at his office at the usual time—ten o’clock.”

“There is another matter that the police may have enquired into,” said the Coroner. “I mention it now, because we naturally want to know all we can—the matter of circumstances. There were no money troubles, for instance?”

"The police have also made enquiry amongst Mr. Guy Markenmore's acquaintances on the Stock Exchange, and in financial circles, sir," replied the barrister. "There seems no doubt that the deceased was in exceedingly prosperous circumstances—a very well-to-do man. All this can be put in evidence later; it seems probable, sir, that you will not be able to conclude this enquiry today, and——"

"Just so—just so," said the Coroner. "Let me hear the rest of the detective's evidence."

Blick resumed his catalogue as if there had been no interruption.

"A gold watch, chain, and pendant locket," he continued. "Various small matters, such as a pen-knife, keys, gold pencil-case. And a letter case, comparatively new, and a pocket-book, evidently old, each containing letters."

"All these are in charge of the police, I suppose, Blick?"

"They are all in charge of the Chief Constable, with the exception of the letter-case and the pocket-book which I have here and now produce."

Herewith Blick, diving into the inner breast pocket of his smart coat, brought out and held up a black morocco letter-case, and a faded green leather pocket-book.

"Have you examined the contents of those things?" asked the Coroner.

"Yes. The Chief Constable and I examined everything in them, carefully, on their discovery."

"What do they contain?"

"This pocket-book contains seven letters, addressed to Sir Guy Markenmore, and all signed either Veronica or Nickie."

"Are they all in the same handwriting?"

"They are, and the address on all is the same—Markenmore Vicarage."

"What are the dates?"

"Only one bears any definite date—New Year's Eve, 1904. The others are dated Monday, or Wednesday, or Friday, as the case may be. But each is in its envelope, and the postal marks are of the year I have just mentioned—1904, and the following year, 1905."

"Anything else in that pocket-book?"

"Yes. Two locks of hair—evidently the same hair—folded in tissue paper, and a small lace-bordered handkerchief."

"Since finding these things, Blick, have you shown them to any one?"

"Yes. After consulting with the Chief Constable, I showed them to Mrs. Tretheroe, at her house, yesterday. On seeing them, she said the seven letters were written by her to Mr. Guy Markenmore some years ago, that the two locks of hair were given by her to him, about the same time, and that the handkerchief was certainly hers—she fancied that he must have stolen it from her at some time or other."

"Now the letter-case. What did you find in that?"

"Two business letters, of recent date, referring to some ordinary share transactions. A receipted bill for a lunch for two persons at the Carlton Hotel, in London; date, April 3rd last. One letter of a private nature; an invitation to dinner. Two receipts from Bond Street tradesmen—one, a jeweller, the other a bookseller. And, in an inner compartment, a letter in its original envelope, addressed to Guy

Markenmore, Markenmore Court, Selcaster, and signed John Harborough."

"Is that letter in the case now, there, before you?"

"It is."

"Has it been shown to any one since you found it?"

"It has not been seen by any one but myself and the Chief Constable."

The barrister raised his hand and pointed to the ledge of the witness-box.

"Take that letter from the case," he said peremptorily. "Hand it to the Coroner."

There was a tense silence in the room as the Coroner, handed the letter, slowly drew forth a sheet of folded note-paper from its envelope, and adjusting his spectacles, read the contents. All eyes were now bent upon him—and they were all quick to see the start which the old gentleman gave as he read, and the shade of annoyed surprise that came over his face. Being human, he was unable to repress a little, smothered exclamation. It was drowned by the sharp accents of the barrister.

"I must ask you, sir, to read that letter to the jury," he said.

The Coroner looked round on Mr. Fransemmery and his eleven companions. Clearly, he had no relish for the task which his duties imposed. But he braced himself—with another look which took in the whole scene before him.

"This letter, gentlemen," he said, turning again to the jury, "is written on a sheet of note-paper, on which is engraved the address Greycloakster, Selcaster, and it is dated December 8th, 1905. It runs as follows:

'GUY MARKENMORE,

The next time I meet you, wherever it is, and whenever it is, whether tomorrow, or a year hence, or five years hence, or ten years hence, I shall shoot you dead like the dog you are.

JOHN HARBOROUGH.' "

The Coroner laid the letter on his desk, took off his spectacles, leaned back in his chair, and looked round him with the air of a man whom something has suddenly wearied. Just as suddenly he leaned forward again, picked up the letter, and passed it to Mr. Fransemmerly. As it went from hand to hand amongst the jurymen, the barrister glanced at the detective and nodded. Blick vanished from the witness-box, and the barrister, catching an inclination of the head from the Coroner, turned to the latter's officer.

"Call John Harborough," he said in a low voice.

Harborough once more walked to the witness-box. During the reading of the letter he had sat steadily watching the Coroner; his face, grim and impassive, betrayed nothing of whatever it was that he was thinking. It remained equally impassive as he took the oath and faced Coroner, jurymen, and the barrister, who, as the witness came forward, had possessed himself of the letter and now stood holding it in his right hand. Waiting until Harborough had taken the oath, he passed the letter across the table to a policeman and motioned him to hand it to the witness. Amidst a dead silence he asked his first question, sinking his voice to a low, but intensely clear whisper and fixing Harborough with a steady look.

"Did you write that letter?"

"I did."

"Did you mean what is said in it?"

"When I wrote it—yes."

"If you had met Guy Markenmore on the morrow you speak of, would you have shot him like a dog?"

"On the morrow—yes, I should."

"Or—a year afterwards?"

"I am not so certain of that."

"Or—five years afterwards."

"No—certainly not!"

"Did you hear the evidence given by Mrs. Braxfield?"

"I did."

"Was it correct?—were you on the hill-side, near her house, at about four o'clock on Tuesday morning last?"

"Her evidence was quite correct—I was."

"You have travelled a great deal in wild countries, I believe, Mr. Harborough. Are you in the habit of carrying a revolver?"

"Yes, I am."

"Had you a revolver on you when you were out on the downs on Tuesday morning?"

"Yes, I had!"

The barrister looked round at the jury. Then he suddenly sat down, and, for the second time that morning, helped himself to a pinch of snuff. He turned from his snuff-box to the Coroner. But the Coroner was nodding at Walkinshaw, who presently rose and faced his client.

"You have just admitted, Mr. Harborough, that you wrote the letter which has been read. Did you write it under great provocation?"

"Under greatest provocation. I firmly believed

that Guy Markenmore had prejudiced Miss Leighton against me, in a most despicable fashion."

"Do you believe that now?"

"I am not at all sure—one way or the other. I began to be doubtful on the point some years ago."

"Is that why you said just now that if you had met Guy Markenmore five years after writing that letter you would certainly not have carried out your hasty threat?"

"Precisely!"

"Your anger had cooled down?"

"It had become simply non-existent."

"May I take it that when you wrote that letter you were passionately in love with Miss Leighton, as the lady in question was then, and that you were furious because you thought Guy Markenmore had wrecked your chance of winning her?"

"You may. That is the fact."

"Finding that you had no chance with the lady you went abroad?"

"Yes—cleared out altogether."

"Did you get over your trouble? You know what I mean."

"I certainly got cured of my infatuation for Miss Leighton. I can truthfully say that I was quite heart-whole again within a couple of years."

"Cured?"

"Absolutely."

"So then, your anger against Guy Markenmore died out?"

"Altogether! I began to see that I might have been mistaken, and that I had made a fool of myself."

"Now supposing you had met Guy Markenmore again, what then?"

"I should have begged his pardon and offered to shake hands with him."

"But—you never did meet him again?"

"Never! I have never seen Guy Markenmore, alive or dead, since I last saw him at Markenmore Vicarage some seven years and five months ago."

Walkinshaw, in his turn, glanced at the jury. Then he nodded to his witness.

"Say, in your own fashion, what were your movements last Tuesday morning," he said.

"I can tell that in a few words," replied Harborough. "I returned home, after seven years' absence, on Monday afternoon. I was somewhat excited by my home-coming, and by meeting two or three old friends and so on. I came to this house for one thing—and I did not sleep very well that night. Also, I am always a very early riser. As I couldn't sleep, I got up at three o'clock, left my house, and went up the downs to the highest point. I came back by Markenmore Hollow and Woodland Cottage, and went home. I was in my own bedroom again at a quarter to five."

"You never saw Guy Markenmore?"

"Never."

"Nor men walking on the downs?"

"I never saw anybody from leaving Greycloister to returning to it."

"Do you know anything whatever of the circumstances of Guy Markenmore's death?"

"Nothing!"

"On your oath. You are innocent of any share in it?"

"Absolutely innocent!"

Walkinshaw sat down, and as nobody else showed

any intention of questioning Harborough, he presently walked away from the witness-box. The Coroner glanced round the officials at the table.

"This would seem a convenient stage for adjourning the enquiry," he said. "But I understand there is a witness here who has volunteered information, of what nature nobody seems to know, and I think we had better hear what he has to say. Call Charles Grimsdale."

CHAPTER IX

THE MIDNIGHT MEETING

The numerous people in court who knew Markemore and its immediate vicinity, turned with one accord as the Coroner spoke and looked at a corner of the room wherein, all through the proceedings, a man had leaned against the oak panelling, carefully watchful, eagerly listening to all that had been said. He was a thick-set, clean-shaven man, save for a pair of close-cropped whiskers that ornamented the upper part of his fresh-coloured cheeks, a man of a horsy appearance, who ever since the Coroner took his seat, had persistently chewed at a bit of straw that protruded from the corner of his firm-set lips. This horsy appearance was accentuated by his garments—a suit of whipcord cloth, of the pepper-and-salt variety, smart box-cloth gaiters, and a white hunting stock, fastened by a large, good horseshoe pin. He looked like a head groom, but the folk in court knew him well enough for Grimsdale, landlord of the Sceptre Inn.

The Coroner had reason for saying that he had no idea of the evidence which Grimsdale had volunteered to give. The truth was that nobody in that room had any idea. And of all the people there who regarded the landlord with curiosity the police regarded him with most—for a good reason. In the course of the

enquiries which they had made in the village and the neighbourhood Blick and his satellites had visited the Sceptre, and had interviewed Grimsdale as to whether he knew anything. Grimsdale, in his shrewd, knowing, reserved fashion had told Blick that he did know something—maybe a good deal—and would tell what he knew . . . at the right time and in the proper place. Blick had exerted all his powers of persuasion in an effort to find out what Grimsdale knew, and had failed, utterly; Grimsdale, always hinting that he knew a lot, had steadfastly refused to say one word until the inquest on Guy Markenmore came off; he would only speak before the Coroner and the jury. Blick, defeated, had set the Chief Constable on to Grimsdale then; the Chief Constable had met with no better luck. Not one word, said Grimsdale, would he say until he got into the witness-box; then, he added, with a knowing wink, they'd be more than a bit surprised, on hearing his evidence. And now here he was, at last, before them, and every police official in the room, from the Chief Constable downwards, was all agog to learn what he had to tell.

Grimsdale in the box, thought more than one keen-eyed observer, looked like a man that knows the importance of his own testimony. There was an expression in his eye, and about his lips, which seemed to indicate that all that had already taken place was nothing—what really was of importance was his story. He was the coolest hand, thought the barrister, that he had ever set eyes on; the sort of witness whom nothing whatever will move: whose testimony, once given, nothing will shake. His entire appearance and calm attitude made the whole roomful of people more attentive than to any previous wit-

ness; there was that about him which made everybody feel that at last something vitally important was going to be heard.

The Coroner took this witness in hand, eliciting from him a few formal facts. Charles Grimsdale, formerly groom in the service of Sir James Marchant; now landlord and licensee of the Sceptre Inn, Markenmore. Had lived in the neighbourhood of Markenmore all his life—born in the village. Knew every member of Sir Anthony Markenmore's family. Knew the late Mr. Guy Markenmore particularly well from the time he was a mere child until he left home seven years ago.

"Have you ever seen Mr. Guy Markenmore since he left home, Grimsdale?" asked the Coroner. He was somewhat at a loss as to what questions to put to the witness, and thought it best to get to useful facts. "I mean—recently?"

"Yes, sir."

"When, then?"

"Last Monday night."

"Where did you see him?"

"At my house—the Sceptre."

"Mr. Guy Markenmore came to your house, the Sceptre Inn, on Monday night?"

"Mr. Guy, sir, was at my house, the Sceptre Inn, from five minutes to twelve on Monday night until a quarter-past three on Tuesday morning."

"He came there?"

"He came there, sir, at the time I've mentioned."

"Did he come alone?"

"He came alone, sir. But he wasn't alone for the rest of the time."

"Who was with him?"

"From twelve o'clock until two, sir, one gentleman. From two o'clock until three, two gentlemen."

"He saw two gentlemen at your house? Who were they?"

"I don't know, sir."

"You don't know? But—I suppose you saw them?"

"I saw one of them, sir. I didn't see the other. At least, I only saw his back—some little distance off, too."

The Coroner looked at the jury and from them to the legal practitioners. From them he turned to the witness-box.

"I think, Grimsdale, you'd better tell us what you know—about whatever it was that happened at your house on Monday night and Tuesday morning—in your own way. Just give us a plain, straightforward account of things."

"Yes, sir. About nine o'clock on Monday night, I was standing in the hall of my house. A gentleman suddenly came in by the front door. He was a tall, well-made, fine-looking man; I should say about fifty years of age. Slightly grey of hair and moustache; fresh-coloured; an active sort of gentleman. Very well dressed in a grey tweed suit; one of those big slouch hats that gentlemen wear nowadays: grey, with a black band; no overcoat, carried a gold-mounted cane. He asked me if I was the landlord; I said I was, at his service, and showed him into a private parlour that I keep for better-class sort of customers. He then said that he wanted to book a room for the night, as he had business in the village. I told him I could give him a very good room, and offered to show it. He said that would be all right:

he was sure it would be comfortable, and added that the Sceptre had been highly recommended to him. He then told me that he expected a gentleman to call on him, late that evening, on business, and asked me if I could prepare supper for two in a private room—a cold supper, he said, would do. I said I could give them a cold chicken and a fine tongue, some tart, and a prime old Stilton cheese, and they could have that room—there was a good fire in it, then, and I would have it made up. He then asked if eleven o'clock would suit me for the supper? I said any time he liked would suit me. We fixed on eleven. He then told me to put a bottle of my very best Scotch whisky and some bottles of soda-water on the side-board, and that I could lay the supper whenever I pleased, for, after he'd had a drink, he was going out for an hour or so, to see some one. I got him a Scotch whisky and soda. While he was drinking it he pulled out a five-pound note, gave it to me, said that he'd probably be in a hurry in the morning, so would I settle his bill that night and give him the change at breakfast, which he wanted at seven-thirty sharp. He then went out. I made up the fire, saw that all was comfortable and ready, and about half-past ten, after I'd closed the house for the night, I laid the supper myself, as my wife wasn't well and had gone to bed early in the evening. At five minutes to eleven he came back."

"Alone?" asked the Coroner.

"Yes, sir, alone. He remained alone, in that parlour, until an hour later. Then, at five minutes to twelve, I heard a knock at the door. I went and opened it, and found Mr. Guy Markenmore there."

"You knew who he was?—you recognized him?"

"Oh yes, sir—I knew Mr. Guy well enough in the old days. He hadn't altered much."

"Had you any conversation with him?"

"Just a bit, sir. He said, 'Hullo, Grimsdale, how are you? I heard you'd blossomed into a full-blown landlord,'—that sort of thing, sir—he was always a gentleman for his joke."

"Did he seem in good spirits?"

"The best, sir! He stood in the hall, laughing and talking a bit about old times, when I used to see him in the hunting field. Then he said, sudden-like, 'I believe you've got a gentleman here who's expecting me?' I said we had, and took him straight to the parlour where the strange gentleman was waiting. I showed him in and closed the door on them."

"Did you hear any greeting exchanged between them, Grimsdale?"

"Well, sir, I just heard the strange gentleman say, 'Hello, Markenmore!' and I heard Sir Guy say, 'Hello, old chap, sorry to be so late.' That was all, sir."

"You didn't hear Mr. Guy mention the other man's name?"

"No, sir."

"Neither then nor at any other time?"

"I never had any further chance, sir. I never went into the room again. The supper was all ready for them. I'd taken in the bottle of whisky and the soda-water which the gentleman had ordered, and the fire was made up. The gentleman had told me, when he came in the second time, that he and the friend he was expecting would very likely sit up very late, as

they'd a lot of business to talk over, and he said that if I wanted to go to bed he'd let his friend out, and see that the front door was fast and the parlour lights turned out."

"Did you go to bed?"

"No, sir, I did not. I sit up late myself, as a rule, and I thought that what he meant by late would perhaps be half-past one, or so. I'd my own supper to get, too, and after I'd had it I sat up smoking in the bar."

"Did you hear anything of the two men in the parlour?"

"Well, sir, I once or twice crossed the hall, and I could hear them talking."

"Just ordinary tones, I suppose? What I mean is you didn't hear any sounds of quarrelling—high voices, or anything of that sort?"

"Oh no, sir! Just ordinary tones."

"Very well. Now then, you said just now that there was one man with Guy Markenmore until two o'clock, and after that there were two men with him until three. What exactly do you mean by that?"

"Well, sir, this. I told you that my wife was poorly that night and had gone to bed early. About two o'clock in the morning I went upstairs to see how she was getting on. She was sleeping all right, so I went down again. As I passed the parlour door, I thought I heard three voices instead of two. I stopped and listened, and I distinctly heard three voices. So I knew then that another man had joined the strange gentleman and Mr. Guy."

"But—that seems a strange thing, Grimsdale!

How could the third man get into your house without your knowledge? At that hour of the night I suppose all your doors were fast, eh?"

"They were all fast, sir—locked. But this third man could get in easy enough. I think you're familiar with the Sceptre, sir? Well, you know that we've a flower garden and lawn in front of the house—between the road and the house. Now, the parlour that these gentlemen were using opened on to the garden and lawn by a French window. They could admit anybody from outside by that—there'd be no need to open any door."

The Coroner looked round at the jury and the lawyers.

"That would look as if some appointment had been made between these two—Guy Markenmore and the first man—with a third man," he remarked. "Grimsdale," he continued, turning to the witness, "you're sure that the strange man who came to your house at nine o'clock on Monday night didn't mention that he was expecting two visitors?"

"Positive, sir! He only spoke of one."

"And you're equally positive that after two o'clock he had two men with him?"

"Certain of it, sir. I made out distinctly that there were three men talking in the parlour, and afterwards I saw them—all three!"

"In the parlour?"

"No, sir—outside."

"What did you see—exactly?"

"Well, sir, after hearing three voices I went back to my easy chair in the bar. I thought that Mr. Guy, having come home again, had asked somebody to slip down to see this friend of his, and that they had

heard him come in at our garden gate—they'd opened the French window, and brought him into the parlour in that way. Of course, as the first gentleman had taken a room for the night that was all right—he could have in whoever he pleased. And as Mr. Guy was there, I knew things would be satisfactory. So I didn't bother myself as to who it was—I thought it might be Mr. Harry—the third man, I mean. As it got toward three o'clock, I began to doze in my chair in front of the fire, and I think I fell asleep. I was awakened by hearing the garden gate clash. I jumped up and looked out of the window. I saw three men in the road outside. They——"

"Stop a bit, if you please," interrupted the Coroner. "This is likely to be a very important point. Now, do you know—precisely—what time this was, Grimsdale?"

"Yes, sir! I looked at the clock on the mantelpiece—an uncommon good timekeeper, sir—as I rose from my chair to pull aside the blind and look out of the window. It was precisely seventeen minutes past three."

"That," observed the Coroner, with a glance at the jury, "is about an hour and a half before sunrise. Now, Grimsdale, how could you see at that time of the early morning?"

"Well, sir, it was a clear night, there was a bit of a moon, and altogether it was a good night for seeing—grey light, you might term it. I could see our stables on the other side of the road clear enough, and the trees round about there, and the road. And I saw those three gentlemen—their figures, I mean—plainly."

"What were they doing?"

"Walking slowly away from the Sceptre up the road towards Greyeloister and Mitbourne, sir."

"Could you distinguish them, one from the other?"

"Yes, sir. I knew which was Mr. Guy, and which was the first man who came to the Sceptre. Mr. Guy was walking in the middle; the gentleman who came at nine o'clock was on his left-hand side; the third man was on his right."

"What sort of man was he?"

"A tall man, sir—a good six foot."

"Did you recognize his figure as that of anybody belonging to this neighbourhood?"

For the first time since his appearance in the witness-box, Grimsdale began to show signs of hesitation. He paused, shaking his head.

"Well, sir, you'll bear in mind, if you please, that it was not as light as it might have been," he answered. "It's difficult, at that time of morning."

"Did you form any idea at the time as to who the man was?" enquired the Coroner.

"Well, I certainly did have a notion—a sort of thought," admitted Grimsdale.

"What was it?"

Grimsdale hesitated again.

"It was only a notion," he said at last. "Just—just the sort of thing that comes into one's mind, like. I'd rather not say!"

"I'm afraid you must say, Grimsdale. You evidently, on seeing him, had some notion as to the identity of the third man. Now, what was it?"

"Well, sir, if I must, I must! I wondered—only wondered, mind you, gentlemen—if it wasn't Mr. Harborough."

"You wondered if the third man, the man walking

on Guy Markenmore's right hand up the road was not Mr. John Harborough. You thought you recognized his figure?"

"Yes, sir. But it was only because the man was very tall, had just about Mr. Harborough's build, and because the three of 'em were going in the direction of Greycloister, Mr. Harborough's house, and then you see, sir, I'd heard that Mr. Harborough was home again, and—well, maybe I'd got him in mind a bit. I—I shouldn't like to let it go out that I say it was Mr. Harborough, because I don't!"

"You couldn't swear that the third man was Mr. Harborough?"

"No, sir—certainly I could not!"

"But he was a man of just about Mr. Harborough's height, build, and personal appearance?"

"Just that, sir."

"Well, about the first man—the man who had taken a room at the Sceptre. What time did he come back there, after this?"

"He never did come back, sir!"

"What!—never came back at all?"

"Never at all, sir! Never set eyes on him since! I've got three pound fourteen shillings change belonging to him, sir—the bill came to one pound six. But as I say, he never came back. I went into the parlour after seeing them in the road—the French window was slightly open, and the two lamps had been turned down. I thought then that I wouldn't bother about going to bed—and I set to work clearing away the supper things and tidying up the parlour. Of course, I expected the gentleman back any minute—my idea was that he'd just strolled up the road a bit

with the other two. But he never came—never seen nor heard of him since, sir.”

The Coroner looked down at the officials and the lawyers. His manner became that of a man who after following various tortuous ways, suddenly finds himself in a *cul-de-sac*.

“It is very evident that this is going to be a protracted enquiry,” he remarked. “The police must get on the track of the two men who were with the deceased at the Sceptre Inn on Monday midnight and early on Tuesday morning. I think we had better adjourn now.”

“I should like to put one or two questions to the witness,” interrupted the barrister. “Grimsdale, you said that the man who came to you at nine o’clock on Monday evening, and booked a room for the night gave you a five-pound note, out of which you were to pay yourself. Have you still got that note?”

“Yes, sir,” answered Grimsdale, pulling out an old-fashioned purse. “Here, sir.”

“That note must be handed over to the police,” said the barrister. “Now, another question—‘What sort of man was the stranger? Was he an Englishman?’ ”

“My impression, sir,” replied Grimsdale, “was that he was one of them Americans—from his speech, sir. When I was in Sir James Marchant’s service I saw a lot of American gentlemen: I took this to be one.”

“Very good—now just one more question. When you tidied up your parlour, did you find anything, any small article that any of these men might have left? Guests do leave things behind, you know, sometimes.”

Grimsdale thrust his hand into another pocket and drew something out.

“I did, sir—I meant to mention it. I found this, lying on the supper table.”

And having first held it aloft, so that every one present could see it, the landlord laid on the edge of the witness-box a silver-mounted briar-wood tobacco pipe.

CHAPTER X

THE RING AND THE PIPE

The barrister possessed himself of the tobacco pipe, examined it, and passed it up to the Coroner, who in his turn looked it over before handing it to Mr. Fransemmery and his fellow jurymen. It went the round of the twelve and returned to the barrister, who held it up for Grimsdale to look at once more.

“You found this—which is a briar-wood tobacco pipe, of superior manufacture, silver-mounted—on the supper-table in your parlour after the three men had gone, Grimsdale?” he asked. “Did you come to the conclusion that one of them had left it there?”

“Certain of it, sir.”

“Why, now, are you certain? I suppose you’d had other customers in that parlour, during the previous day?”

“Yes, sir. But I’d laid the supper-table myself. That pipe, sir, when I found it, was lying on a small plate—where one of the gentlemen had sat. And it had just been used, sir—the bowl was warm.”

“I congratulate you on your power of observation, Grimsdale,” said the barrister with a smile. He laid the pipe on the table before him, amongst his papers, and turned to the Coroner. “I think, sir, you spoke of adjourning at this stage?” he continued. “If I may make a suggestion, it would, I

think, be best if the adjournment is of such a nature as to afford time for more searching enquiry; it seems to me that there is a good deal to go into, and——”

“We will adjourn to this day fortnight,” said the Coroner. He turned to the jury and gave them some instructions and advice as to keeping their minds open until further evidence was put before them. Then, with a murmured expression of his hope that by the time they met again the police would be able to throw more light on what was a very painful problem, he left his chair, obviously relieved that the morning’s proceedings had come to an end.

The old dining-hall rapidly cleared. Spectators, witnesses, officials began to unpack themselves out of nooks and corners and to drift away in groups and knots, discussing the events and revelations of the morning. Mrs. Tretheroe went off with her two guests; Harry Markenmore and his sister left the room in company with Harborough; the jurymen filed away in twos and threes. But in the centre of the temporary Court, around the big table at which the lawyers and officials had sat, with books and papers before them, several men gathered, and began to discuss matters informally—the Chief Constable; Blick; the barrister who had represented the authorities; Chilford; Walkinshaw, and Mr. Fransemmerly, who, in spite of the Coroner’s admonition, felt himself justified in hearing whatever there was to hear.

“What I feel about it,” Chilford was saying as Mr. Fransemmerly joined the group, “is just this—and I say it as solicitor to the Markenmore family—there must be a searching investigation into Guy Marken-

more's business affairs and his private life in London! This affair was not originated here, nor engineered here! If Detective-Sergeant Blick wants to get at the bottom of things he ought to begin in London—where Guy Markenmore has lived for some years past."

"You think he was followed down here?" suggested the barrister, who, business being over, had lighted a cigarette, and sitting on the edge of the table, was comfortably smoking. "You think this was a job put up in London?"

"I think there's every probability that all and everything that we've heard this morning has practically nothing whatever to do with the real truth about the murder of Guy Markenmore!" answered Chilford. "I'm quite certain—in my own mind—that John Harborough is as innocent as I am, and I'm not much less certain that the two men who were with Guy at the Sceptre are also innocent. The probability is that those men will be heard of—they'll come forward. You'll find that the meeting at the Sceptre—an odd one, if you like!—was nothing but a business meeting. No—we've got nowhere yet! As I say, if Blick there wants to do some ferret-work, he's got to go back and start in London. How do we know what Guy Markenmore's affairs were? Or his secrets? For all we know, somebody or other may have had good reason for getting rid of him."

"What puzzles me considerably," observed the Chief Constable, "is—how did those two men who were with Guy Markenmore at the Sceptre come into and get out of the district unobserved? My men have already made the most exhaustive enquiries

at every railroad station in the neighbourhood, and we've got hold of—nothing!"

"Strangers, too!" said Walkinshaw.

"How do we know that?" demanded Chilford. "There are a tidy lot of men within an area of twenty miles who might have business dealings with Guy Markenmore. His business here that night might have been just as much with those two men as with his brother and sister. Probably it was."

"Grimsdale asserts that the first man was an American," remarked Walkinshaw. "We haven't a plenitude of Americans in residence about here. I could count them on my fingers."

"That's so," said the Chief Constable. "If the man was an American—and Grimsdale says he's met a good many in his time, so he ought to know—he came from somewhere outside our neighbourhood. But what beats me is—how did he and the other man get away, unobserved, on Tuesday morning?"

Mr. Fransemmery, who, like Blick, had listened attentively, but silently, to these exchanges of opinion and idea, coughed gently, as if deprecating any idea that he wished to interfere.

"Talking of—of America," he remarked, "it may be of no importance, and not even relative to the subject under discussion, but I may observe that a mail steamer left Southampton for New York at one o'clock on Tuesday afternoon last. Now, Markenmore is within thirty miles of Southampton by road, and if this man—the first man—was an American, it is possible that he journeyed to Southampton, caught that boat, and was away to sea before hearing of what had befallen the man whom he had entertained to supper. I know about that boat, because I mailed

some antiquarian documents to a friend of mine in the United States by it."

The Chief Constable twisted his military moustache and considered Mr. Fransemmery.

"Um!" he remarked. "Might be a good deal in that—he might certainly have taken this place in his way between London and Southampton. But—the queer thing is, we can't hit on a trace of his coming or going!"

"Why did he never return to the Sceptre—where three pounds fourteen shillings change was due to him?" asked Walkinshaw.

"I don't know," said the Chief Constable. "But I'm very sure of this—whoever he was, he didn't board the early morning train from Selcester to London, either at Selcester or at Mitbourne, that particular morning. There were only five passengers went aboard at Selcester, and two at Mitbourne, and the railway folks know every man jack of 'em!"

"It's not necessary to board a train to get into or out of a district," observed Walkinshaw. "My own belief is that these two men came here and left here by motor-car."

The Chief Constable looked at Walkinshaw and grunted his dissent.

"Do you think I haven't thought of that?" he said. "I've had my men making enquiries of that sort all over the place! Every neighbouring village—every farmstead on the hill-sides! And—not one scrap of information."

"That doesn't surprise me, nor affect what I say," retorted Walkinshaw. "You know as well as I do that where we are now is about the middle of what we'll call a triangle. On each of all three sides of us

lies a big main road. On every one of these three roads there's no end of motor traffic nowadays. I ought to know, for I live on one of them. I reckon there are at least forty cars of one sort or another pass my house every hour."

"Not first thing in the morning!" interrupted the Chief Constable sceptically.

"I'm giving you an average," said Walkinshaw. "From five o'clock onward, anyhow. Do you think one car would be noticed out of the hundreds that come and go? Rot!"

"Where did they put their car while they came to the Sceptre?" asked the Chief Constable.

"I see nothing difficult about that," replied Walkinshaw. "I'd engage to hide any car, however big, in one of our byways or plantations, or in a convenient spot in the hollows of the downs, for a few hours, without anybody seeing it. A lonely district like this, and at night, too! Easy enough!"

"If these two men came together in a car," said Chilford, "why did one man present himself at Grimsdale's at nine o'clock in the evening and the other at two o'clock in the morning?"

"For that matter—if you're going into whys and wherefores," retorted Walkinshaw, "where did the first man go when he walked out of the Sceptre's door after first going there? He was away until close on eleven o'clock. Where had he been?"

"Well, we've gone into that, too!" said the Chief Constable, almost defiantly. "There isn't a soul in the village who saw any stranger at all that night!"

"But no one knew of him till Grimsdale had testified."

"Or—who'll admit that they did!" sneered Chil-

ford. "He must have gone somewhere, and seen somebody." He pulled out his watch. "I'm going home to lunch," he said. "This is waste of time. My advice to Blick is—go back on your tracks and get to work at the fountain-head—in London!"

"What's Blick say?" asked the barrister with a laugh. He had steadily smoked cigarettes in silence while the others had talked. "Come, Blick?"

"Blick is a wise young man," said the Chief Constable. "He's going to say nothing. You'll take your own line, eh, Blick?"

"As at present advised," answered Blick, with a smile. "Always ready to hear anything in the way of suggestion though."

"Come along," said Chilford, "it's two o'clock. Glad to give any of you—all of you—some lunch if you'll come with me. Cold food—but plenty of it."

The men trooped out into the hall. And there, coming from the morning-room, they saw Harry Markenmore and Valencia. Harry came up to the group and nodded at Blick.

"My sister wants to ask Sergeant Blick a question," he said, turning to the Chief Constable. "Something about my late brother's personal effects."

Blick turned to Valencia; the other men paused, interested and attentive. Valencia looked at the detective with something of anxiety.

"It was you, wasn't it, who examined my brother Guy's clothing and what he had on him?" she asked. "You mentioned a lot of things in the witness-box this morning. Did you mention everything?"

"Everything—yes," replied Blick.

"Every single thing that you found?"

"Every single thing!"

Valencia's eyes grew more troubled. She looked round at the attentive faces.

"There—there was something that you didn't mention that my brother certainly had on him when he went out of this house on Monday night at half-past ten," she said, turning again to Blick. "A ring!—a ring of very curious workmanship, on the third finger of his right hand."

"He had one ring on the third finger of his right hand," said Blick. "A very fine diamond ring—a single stone."

"He had two rings on the third finger of his right hand," asserted Valencia. "The diamond ring you speak of, and this other one. I spoke of it to him while he was here. It was a ring of very odd appearance—it looked to me like copper, with some enamel work on it. It attracted my attention because—because I know some one who has a ring exactly like it—its duplicate, in fact."

"Yes?" said Blick quietly. "Who?"

"Mrs. Tretheroe," replied Valencia.

The men standing by glanced at each other.

"You are sure your brother was wearing this second, odd-looking ring when he left you?" asked Blick.

"I am certain of it," affirmed Valencia. "Absolutely!"

"And you say that Mrs. Tretheroe has a similar ring?"

"Which she always wears," said Valencia.

"There was no such ring on your brother's finger when I made my examination," remarked Blick.

"But now—I'll see into the matter."

Harry and Valencia went back to the morning-room, and the others made for the front door. But before they reached it, another interruption in their progress towards Chilford's hospitable table occurred. A young, alert-looking man, who held a note-book in one hand, and pencil in the other, came up.

"Mr. Chief Constable," he said, with confident assurance, "allow me to introduce myself—Mr. Summers, of the *Daily Sentinel*—specially sent down, sir."

"What do you want?" asked the Chief Constable. He was thinking of Chilford's cold roast beef, and had a natural dislike of reporters. "Nothing more to tell you than what you've heard."

"I should be obliged if you'd show me the five-pound note which the presumed American gave to Grimsdale," said Mr. Summers, "and the tobacco pipe which was left at the Sceptre."

The Chief Constable turned to Blick.

"Any objection to that?" he asked.

"I should say that Mr. Blick—from what I happen to know of his great abilities—has no objection," interposed Mr. Summers, who was clearly one of those young men who leave no stone unturned in the effort to build up good copy. "Mr. Blick, sir, knows the value of publicity—especially in a journal of our immense circulation—as well as I do."

"No objection at all," said Blick, laughing. "There's the note—I suppose you want the number? B. H. 887563. The pipe—that's on the table inside—the police have it. Here, I'll show it to you."

He went back into the old dining-room with Summers; the others waited, chatting about Valencia's

information respecting the ring. A few minutes passed; then Blick, looking slightly puzzled, put his head into the hall.

"Chief Constable!" he called. "That pipe!—have you got it?"

The Chief Constable turned around with a suddenly roused alertness.

"I?" he exclaimed. "No—I haven't got it. Isn't it there?"

Blick shook his head, his puzzled look changing to one of vexation. He withdrew into the dining-room again, and the Chief Constable strode after him. The other men followed, each impelled by a curiosity for which they would have found it hard to account. Blick was rummaging about amongst the books and papers on the table. Two or three policemen were there; so, too, were a similar number of solicitors' clerks, and the Coroner's officer; at one end of the table a couple of local reporters were busily writing out their notes.

"I've never seen it—at least since it was held up," said a police-sergeant to whom Blick was appealing. "I saw Grimsdale produce it, and I saw the Coroner and the jurymen handling it, and I've never seen it since."

"Who had it last?" asked Blick.

"I had!" answered the barrister. "I took it from the jury, and laid it on the table—just there."

"Well, it's gone!" said Blick. He turned to the police-sergeant. "Have any of your men gone away who might have been likely to pick it up?"

"Nobody's gone away yet," replied the sergeant. "We're all here—all of us that came."

Blick turned over everything that remained on

the table. His face curiously set, and he said nothing.

"Everybody that went out of the room passed along that side of the table," remarked the sergeant. "If anybody wanted to pick it up and carry it off, they'd nothing to do but put a hand out. Nobody would notice—in that crush."

"Who should want to carry it off?" asked Blick with asperity.

Summers, who had been assisting in the search, suddenly chuckled.

"There's one man in existence who'd have been jolly glad to carry it off!" he exclaimed.

Blick looked up, frowning.

"What do you mean?" he snapped out. "Who?—what man?"

"The man who left it on the supper-table at the Sceptre, of course!" retorted Summers, with another chuckle. "How do you know he wasn't there amongst the deeply-interested audience? May have been!"

Blick threw aside a final mass of papers, and turned to the door.

"Well, it's gone, anyway!" he muttered.

"Nice piece of evidence disappeared, too," soliloquized Summers. "You might have traced it to its rightful owner, Mr. Blick. But I think he's got it—what? Clever! However, if he's the person who purloined it off this table, you know one thing—he's somebody who's somewhere close at hand. Eh, Mr. Blick?"

But Blick was once more in the hall, and the Chief Constable and the other men followed him.

"Odd, that, Blick!" said the Chief Constable. "Who can have got it—and why?"

"There may be something in what that newspaper chap says," answered Blick in an undertone. "The man who left it at the Sceptre may have been here this morning, and taken the opportunity to possess himself of it. However——"

"Now come across the park to my house, you fellows, and have some lunch," broke in Chiford. "All ready—come on!"

Blick excused himself—he had work to do, he said. On the previous day, finding that his labours at Markenmore were likely to be protracted, he had taken rooms at the Sceptre, and thither he now hastened. He had many things in hand; much to think over. That morning, before going to the inquest, he had sent a messenger into Selcaster with instructions to buy certain matter for him: his first question on reaching the Sceptre was—had the messenger returned?

"Parcels on your sitting-room table, Mr. Blick," answered Grimsdale. "Lunch there, too."

Blick sat down to his lunch, alone, and ate and drank steadily for half an hour. Then, when the table had been cleared, he lighted his pipe, pulled out his penknife, and cut the string of the parcels that had been sent him from Selcaster.

CHAPTER XI

FIRST STEPS

The messenger whom Blick had sent into Selcaster that morning, before he himself went up to Markenmore Court to attend the Coroner's inquest, had carried a letter to the principal bookseller and stationer in the old city. There were certain things that Blick found himself in great need of in tackling the problems which had just been put before him; the bookseller was the man to supply him. And now here were the bookseller's parcels—one, a long, rolled thing, carefully wrapped in canvas; the other a fat little parcel in brown paper. Blick undid that first and drew out and laid on his table a folding road map, a general map of the county, two or three local guide-books, illustrated by photographs, a more ambitious work, *Environs of Selcaster*, also full of pictures, a Bradshaw's Railway Guide, and a local time-table. He looked over all these carefully as he laid them out—they were just what he wanted. But he felt still greater interest in the long, canvas-covered parcel, which, divested of its wrappings, proved to contain the Government Ordnance Map of the Markenmore village and immediate surroundings—a big square thing, on stout paper, wherein every road, bylane, footpath, house, cottage, meadow, wood, field, coppice, river, stream, hedgerow, stile, was marked,

named, and measured. Blick's detective instincts rejoiced at the sight of that masterly performance—he blessed the men of the Ordnance Survey service for their meticulous care in preparing it. Going out in search of Grimsdale, he procured some tin tacks from him; with these he fastened his Ordnance Map to a convenient blank space on the wall of his sitting-room, and for the next half-hour stood smoking his pipe in front of it. At the end of that time he had memorized the general lie of his surroundings and committed the more important place-names to the secret cells of his quick brain.

He turned then to the guide-books, maps, and timetables, and for two hours pored over them with absorbed intentness. He wanted to know all about roads, railways, and times—spade-work this, but of high importance. And he saw at once that, as Walk-inshaw had said, during the informal talk which had followed on the adjournment, Markenmore lay near the middle of a sort of triangle, with main roads running along each side. The triangle formed by these roads was of the sort which has two sides longer than the third, but are equal to each other; the third was of further extent. Markenmore lay in the south-west part of this triangle, inclining towards the corner made by the bare line and the longer line of the three; consequently it was nearer to two sides of the triangle than to the third, and therefore to two of the main roads than to the other. Now of these three main roads, two, both starting from London, ran to the Court, within a few miles of Markenmore; the third ran all the way along the coast itself. As regards highways, then, Markenmore was in direct communication with London, exactly sixty-five miles

to the north-east, and with several coast towns at nearer distances.

But in addition to the triangle made by these main roads, there was yet another, made by railways. The railways, indeed, followed, and ran parallel with the highways; they corresponded to them in every respect; road and rail ran alongside each other, with no greater intervening space at any point than a mile or so. Markenmore was within easy distance of these main railway routes. Several stations could be easily gained from it. Selcaster itself lay two and a half miles to the south-east; Mitbourne about the same distance to the east; there was a somewhat important junction three miles to the south-west; a roadside station four miles due north. And on turning to his time-table, Blick discovered that between four and six o'clock in the morning, there were, taking these four stations altogether, a respectable number of trains going north or south, east or west, and that from two stations, the junction aforesaid and the one to the north, there were at a quarter to six every morning, workmen's special trains, which doubtless conveyed large numbers of craftsmen, artisans and labourers into the big shipping port a few miles away on the coast. Altogether, he saw that a smart, astute man would have no difficulty in getting away unobserved from the Markenmore district by an early morning train, in any one of at least six separate directions.

Turning again to the question of access and excess by the roads, Blick remembered what Walkinshaw had said about the facilities which the district afforded for successfully hiding a motor-car while its owner or occupant paid a visit. Here the Ordnance

Map on the wall gave him great help. The entire contour and configuration of the country was plainly shown. North and north-east of Markenmore village, behind Greycloister, Mr. John Harborough's big house, The Warren, Mr. Fransemmer's residence, and Woodland Cottage, Mrs. Braxfield's domain, lay over downs, which, bleak and bare, in the main, were intersected by deep lanes, and honeycombed by disused chalk-pits, thickly grown over with vegetation and shrubbery; there were also plantations, coppices, and here and there deep woods. It would be an easy thing for any one to turn aside from a main road into these solitudes, leave a motor-car in the shadows of some old, unworked pit, or amongst the elms and beeches of a wood, while he came down into the village. Moreover, Blick noticed that on the Ordnance Map were marked several grass tracks across the downs; now, he had already seen enough of the downs about Markenmore Hollow to know that the turf up there was so wiry, resilient, and firm that you could drive an automobile across it, almost anywhere, with as great ease as on a macadamized road and without leaving any trace. Therefore a man might have turned off the main roads, crossed the downs to some point within a couple of miles of the village, left his car in some convenient old chalk-pit, and felt assured that no one would know how he came nor how he left. Up there, on those solitudes, there was not a house, not a cottage, not even an outlying farm, marked on the map.

So much for these matters—Blick now turned to a third. Grimsdale had said that when the three men left his house at a quarter-past three on Tuesday morning, he saw them walk up the road in the direc-

tion of Greycloister and Mitbourne; Blick directed his attention to this road. Immediately in front of the Sceptre, flanking on its front garden, in fact, was the main road of the village; at the corner of the garden it divided; one branch, to the right, turning off, direct, to Selcaster; the other, on the left, turning to Mitbourne, and, at about three hundred yards from the Sceptre, passing the entrance gates of Greycloister. Now according to Grimsdale, the three men took this road and disappeared along it. But Guy Markenmore, if the medical evidence was reliable, was shot dead, about four o'clock, at Markenmore Hollow, about a mile northward of this road. How had he come there? The Ordnance Map and its meticulously careful markings, showed that. Two hundred yards from the Sceptre Inn, on the Mitbourne road, there were two footpaths, one on either side of the way. One, on the south, or right-hand side, went across the meadows in the directions of Selcaster; the other, on the north, or left-hand side, turned up to the downs, between Greycloister and Woodland Cottage. Near Markenmore Hollow—in fact, at the very spot whereat Guy Markenmore's dead body had been found by the ploughman, Hobbs, this path struck into another, which led direct to Mitbourne Station. And on seeing this, Blick came to a conclusion: When the three men came to these footpaths, they separated. One man either turned back to the village (unlikely, thought Blick) or took the right-hand footpath to Selcaster (very probable, Blick considered); the other two men, of whom Guy Markenmore was certainly one, took the left-hand path, and climbed the hill-side to Markenmore Hollow. There Guy Markenmore was suddenly murdered, and whichever man it

was who was with him, whether the presumed American who had come to the Sceptre at nine o'clock on Monday night, or the man who had been given admittance at two o'clock on Tuesday morning, was the murderer.

Arrived at this conclusion, Blick felt somewhat cheerful. He refilled and lighted his pipe, put his hands in his pockets, and lounged out of his sitting-room, across the hall, and into the bar-parlour. This was years before the imposition of those rigorous licensing restrictions which now prevent the free-born Englishman from taking his ease in his inn whenever he feels so disposed, and though it was only five o'clock in the afternoon the cosy bar-parlour contained several customers—village idlers who were discussing the inquest and the tragedy that had given rise to it. All and each already knew Blick as the great London detective who had come there to find out who had killed poor young Master Guy, and to hang that same varmint when found, and they stared at Blick's light hair, blue eyes, chubby countenance, and smart town clothes as if wondering how such a youthful-looking cherub could possibly possess the faculties of a ferret and the persistency of a foxhound. But Blick, beyond giving them a friendly nod, paid no attention to these patriarchs and wiseacres—he fully intended to cultivate their acquaintance at some future time, but just then he wanted a word or two with Grimsdale.

Grimsdale, in his shirt-sleeves, was polishing glasses at the farther end of the bar; Blick strolled up and leaned over to him.

"I say!" he whispered. "A word or two with you, Grimsdale. That pipe you found——"

"Yes, sir?" returned Grimsdale, leaning across the bar.

"I suppose," continued Blick, "that you took a good look at it?"

"I did, sir."

"Did you notice the name or initials of the makers?"

"Yes, sir. It was one of those L. & Co.'s pipes. I know 'em well enough, Mr. Blick—my old guv'nor, Sir James Marchant, used to smoke 'em. He's given me one of his old ones, now and again."

"One of Löewe & Company's, eh?" said Blick, who had already assured himself of that fact, and only wanted to know if the landlord knew.

"L. & Co.'s sir—that's what I call 'em; that's how they're stamped—on the wood, and on the silver mount—and of course, markings on the silver—a lion and a crown and so on, same as all silver articles are."

"Did you notice anything else about the pipe?"

"I noticed two things, Mr. Blick—I'm one of those that's given to noticing. It was a newish pipe; the other was this—there was a slight, very slight chip in the edge of the bowl, as if its owner had knocked out the ashes against something sharp—perhaps against the edge of a fender, or against the heel of his boot, and caught a nail there; I've seen many a good pipe chipped that way, however sound the wood is."

"Good!" said Blick. "You've certainly a talent for observation."

Grimsdale smiled.

"Aye, well!" he said, sinking his voice still lower. "I didn't say anything about it in that witness-box,

but—between you and me—when I learnt all I did about this murder, I put a mark of my own on that pipe!”

“You did?” exclaimed Blick. “What mark?”

“Bit of a cross on the silver band,” said Grimsdale. He winked knowingly at the detective. “I’d know my own mark again—anywhere!”

Blick nodded. Then he glanced round at the men in the far corner of the room.

“Gossiping about all this, I suppose?” he asked.

“Aye!” assented Grimsdale. “Lord bless you!—they’ll talk of nothing else for many a day—unless there’s a four-legged fowl or a calf with three heads comes along! It’s pie to them, all this, Mr. Blick. You being a Londoner, you don’t know what village folk are for talk and gossip!”

“Who’s the biggest gossip in the place?” asked Blick.

“Benny Cripps, the sexton,” replied Grimsdale promptly. “Get talking to him, and he’ll tell you the whole history of Markenmore and every man, woman, and child in it, high and low, rich and poor, since Doomsday—whenever that was, and it must be a long time ago. They say he knows the pedigree of these Markenmores, for instance, better than they do themselves!”

“An interesting old party,” remarked Blick. “Where does he hang out?”

“Next cottage to the churchyard,” replied Grimsdale. “Old, thatched cottage.”

“Well,” said Blick, lifting his elbows off the bar-counter. “I’m going for a stroll—to have a look round. You’ll have supper ready for me about eight?”

"Right, sir—got a nice roast chicken for you," answered Grimsdale. "A beauty!"

Blick laughed, nodded, and went away into the village street. He had an eye for the picturesque, this tracker of criminals, and the little south-country settlement, half as ancient as the hill-sides above it, appealed to him. Markenmore was a place of tiny thatched cottages, set in gardens and orchards, with here and there a substantial farmstead, set back from the road, in its paddock or home-garth; its main feature stood in its midst—a grey old church, whose tower and spire rose high above the elms and poplars that fenced in the churchyard. In these early spring days there was a great sense of peace about these rustic surroundings, and it struck Blick that it seemed odd that he should be there, amidst so much natural serenity, under his present circumstances. Everything just then, from the new flowers and plants in the cottage gardens to the new nests high in the fresh-leaved trees, spoke of life—and his task was to discover the author of a crime, the cause of a violent death.

He was presently reminded of that death and its consequences by the sight of an old man, who, in a nook of the tree-surrounded churchyard, was superintending the digging of two graves. Blick remembered then that Sir Anthony Markenmore and his elder son were to be buried side by side on the next day but one—the old man, accordingly, must be the sexton, Benny Cripps, of whom Grimsdale had just spoken. He entered the churchyard and went up to him; the sexton, a gnarled old fellow of apparently seventy, turned from his two diggers and gave the detective a knowing nod. He sat down on a box-

tomb close by, and pulling out a short clay pipe proceeded to light it.

"You be the young London feller what's come here to find out who killed young Mr. Guy, I do hear?" he observed, looking Blick over with critical eyes. "A sharp 'un you be at your job, too, I do understand. Well, and I 'low as how you've got your work set, my fine young man, I do so! 'Tain't going to be found out in a day, ain't that, nor yet in a week. Didn't make much out at the Coroner's 'quest, neither—no!"

"You were there, eh?" asked Blick.

"There I was, master, and hear all as was said. And come away about so wise as I did go. Lord bless 'ee, 'tain't only just starting this here! You'm like one o' they exploring fellers that goes into furrin parts, setting out, like, on a path that you don't know the end of!"

"I guess you're about right," admitted Blick. "Bit of a tangle, isn't it?"

"I believe 'ee, my son! And so far as I see, I don't see no sort of a clue as you can lay hands on to guide 'ee, like. All same, I do have my own opinions—sure! And ain't going to alter 'em for nobody—not for the King himself, and no disrespect to him, neither."

Blick sat down by the old man's side, and lighted his own pipe.

"You're Mr. Cripps, aren't you?" he asked. "Sexton, I think?"

"Benjamin Cripps I be, young master, and sexton I am, and parish clerk, and a mort o' other offices, and the one man in this here village can't do without, nohow. Five vicars there's been in Markenmore i'

my time and here I am—buried four of 'em! They comes and they goes—but I stops. Been parish clerk here five-and-forty years, and my father he was same for nigh as many, and his father before him; he was same, too, but for over fifty, the Crippses, we've been in this parish as long as they Markenmores themselves, and buried a sight or 'em, and now I'm going to bury two more. This here church, now, you might say as how we Crippses, it belongs to we—knows all about it, we do, and about most things in this here village. Keeps it—so to speak."

"And what do you think about this affair, Mr. Cripps?" asked Blick suavely. "A man of your experience will have an opinion. Do you call it a murder, now?"

"Murder I do entitle it, my dear young London man, and a grievous and bloody one! Ain't going for to say as how young Master Guy was a parrygon of righteousness, 'cause he wasn't, and didn't make no pretensions to being one o' them here saints what we reads about in the prayer-book. But murdered he was, and cruel shameful; and you ain't got on the real truth o' the matter I do suppose—no, nor won't yet awhile. But I hope 'ee will, and I'll tramp cheerful to hear whoever done it sentenced to be hanged—so I will!"

"You haven't any idea of your own about it, I suppose?" suggested Blick.

"Ain't got what you might call precise ideas—yet," declared Cripps. "But Lord bless 'ee, of course it do be something to do with something rising out of that there young Jezebel at the Dower House!—and I don't care if she do hear me say so. Her be a terr'ble sinful and scarlet lot, that! I mind she well enough

when her pa was vicar here, and her a young lass that should ha' been minding her hemming and stitching, and such-like women's work. But her didn't never take to no such peaceful okkypations; her was allus a-trapesing about wi' a pack o' young fellers at her skirts, and a-setting 'em by the ears. Lot o' trouble her occasioned when she was a girl, and now as soon as her comes back to the place, her starts it again."

"Then you think Mrs. Tretheroe's something to do with it?" asked Blick.

"Don't say hers anything to do wi' it, active like," replied the old sexton. "But I do say as how, in my opinion, hers at the bottom of it, one way or another. Lord bless 'ee, some on 'em—young gentlemen—was for fighting each other about her before her was eighteen year old! If it had been i' the old days, there'd ha' been a mort o' they duels fought about her. Her was that sort—first favouring one, and then t'other till they was all mad, like!"

"I suppose Mr. Guy Markenmore was pretty mad about her at that time, eh?" suggested Blick.

"Umph!" said Cripps. "Runned after her a deal, he did, to be sure. But he was a powerful bad 'un for running after women-folk of all sorts, high and low—turned the heads of half the lasses in this village, he did! Lord bless 'ee, he was always a-making love, all round—couldn't help it, seemed so. Left some aching hearts behind him, did Master Guy when he went away to London town."

"What, amongst the village girls?" asked Blick.

"Aye—and 'mongst the village men!" growled the sexton. "There was more than one young feller that had reason to hate him, so there was! Dead he

is, and not to be spoke ill of now—but he was a bad 'un, sure-ly!"

This paradoxical answer suggested a new train of thought to Blick, and he presently went away to think it over. But ere he had gone far, he remembered that he had a question to ask of Mrs. Tretheroe, so he passed through the village and betook himself to the front door of the Dower House.

CHAPTER XII

THE DOWER HOUSE

The Dower House was a big, rambling, old-fashioned place which stood within large, enclosed grounds and gardens of its own, in the south-east corner of Markenmore Park, a little way out of the village, and about two hundred yards from the Sceptre Inn. Nearly as capacious as Markenmore Court itself, it possessed a considerable range of stabling and outhouses, and was altogether a residence of wide extent and accommodation. Blick took a rapid, estimating view of it and its surroundings as he walked up the drive; everything had lately been done up and put in order there; the Dower House, he thought, was much more pretentious in appearance than the Court. The ancient residence of the Markenmore family was outwardly shabby, neglected, much in want of fresh paint; the Dower House was spick and span; its lawn and gardens trim and carefully kept. And Blick was not at all surprised when, in answer to his knock and ring, the door was opened by a very tall, supercilious footman, clad in a gorgeous livery. It appeared to be an effort to this person to bring his eyes down to the level of the caller's face.

“Mrs. Tretheroe at home?” demanded Blick.

"Mrs. Tretheroe is indisposed," answered the footman. "She is not receiving today."

Blick pulled out his card-case.

"I am sorry to hear that Mrs. Tretheroe isn't well," he remarked. "But I saw her an hour or two ago, and I think she will give me a few minutes' interview on very urgent business. Just give her my card, if you please."

The footman took the card gingerly, glanced at it, stared at Blick's youthfulness a little wonderingly, and backing away from the door, seemed to invite the caller inside. Blick stepped into an outer hall.

"My orders were very precise," remarked the footman, grudgingly. "But if it's very important business——"

"It is!" interrupted Blick. "Very!"

"I'll see Mrs. Tretheroe's maid," said the footman. "Please to wait."

He vanished into the gloom of an inner hall, behind a *portière* of heavy curtains, and Blick, left alone, looked round him. The place in which he waited, alone, was small; an ancient oak press stood on one side of him; on the other, a big stand, wherefrom hung a medley of coats, cloaks, and outdoor wraps. And amongst them, the most prominent object was a smart Raglan overcoat, of a brightish blue shade, which Blick recognized at once. He had seen it at the inquest that morning—worn by the big blond-moustached man who had sat at Mrs. Tretheroe's right hand throughout the proceedings.

With one of those rare flashes of intuition which are the very inspiration of genius in a man of his profession, Blick moved like lightning to that coat and slid his right hand into the nearest pocket. He felt

a pair of gloves—and beneath the gloves, a pipe. With his ears strained to the keenest tension and his eye kept warily on the folding curtains, he drew that pipe out and gave one glance at it. He would have chuckled with delight had he dared—for this was the pipe that Grimsdale had found on the supper-table at the Sceptre! There was no doubt of it—there was the slight chip in the briar-wood. . . .

“Where is Mr. Blick?” demanded a woman’s voice, somewhere behind the curtains. “In the front hall?”

Blick slipped the pipe back into the pocket, moved himself six inches, and was staring with much interest at a fox’s mark, mounted on the wall, when the curtains parted and a woman appeared. For a second he looked at her with suddenly awakened interest; and she was no ordinary woman, he decided. Primly and somewhat coquettishly dressed in black, with a smart cap and an even smarter apron of spotless muslin, she looked more French than English, and as vivacious as she was undeniably pretty. But the prettiness was somewhat faded; this, decided Blick, was a woman of thirty-five or so who had had affairs in her times; there were the signs of old fires in her brilliant eyes and about her lips; it seemed to him that she was the sort in whom secrets lie sleeping. And she was the sort of a woman, too, who could not look at a man without smiling at him: she smiled now as she glanced at the latter.

“Mr. Blick?” she said in a soft, demure voice. “You want to see Mrs. Tretheroe? She is not very well—that affair this morning, you know, and all the rest of it—nervous headache. But if it’s business——”

"It is, but nothing to distress Mrs. Tretheroe," answered Blick. "A question or two."

The woman held aside one of the curtains and revealed a roomy inner hall, on one side of which rose a galleried staircase.

"Come this way, please," she said.

Blick followed her up the stair. An open door at the end of the gallery showed him a drawing-room, and in it a grand piano; at the piano sat the blond-moustached man. He was singing, evidently to please himself, and accompanying his fine baritone voice with soft chords. His conductress glanced at Blick and smiled again.

"The Baron—singing Italian love-songs!" she murmured. "He prefers that to shooting, or hunting, or golf! Tastes differ—don't they?"

"With nationalities," said Blick. He had already decided that Mrs. Tretheroe's maid was a bit of a character, worth cultivating, and he smiled back at her. "I guess he's not English, eh?" he suggested.

"German!" answered the maid knowingly. "All fat!" She laughed, paused before a door, tapped gently, and opening it, motioned Blick to enter. "Mr. Blick, ma'am."

Mrs. Tretheroe's voice, somewhat languid in tone, bade Mr. Blick enter, and he walked into what he immediately took to be the boudoir wherein its occupant had held her *tête-à-tête* with Guy Markenmore after their meeting on the Monday night. Although it was still quite light outside, a rose-tinted lamp was burning in this luxurious nook, and by its subdued gleam Blick saw Mrs. Tretheroe, negligently but becomingly attired, lounging on a sofa; if she was pale, he thought, she was perhaps the more

striking. And whether she had a nervous headache or not, she was smoking; the room was heavy with the peculiar scent of fine Turkish tobacco, and on a stand near its mistress's sofa stood an open box of cigarettes.

"Take a chair," said Mrs. Tretheroe, glancing approvingly at Blick's good looks and smart clothes. "This"—she pointed to an easy chair close to herself. "Have a cigarette, won't you? I'm smoking to soothe my headache.—I got quite upset by all that business this morning. Such an awful lot of talk about nothing, don't you think?"

Blick out of sheer politeness, took a cigarette, though he hated Turkish tobacco like poison, and dropped into an easy chair.

"Depends," he answered tersely. "Sometimes you have to do an awful lot of talking over things of this sort—no end of questions, you know, before you can get at one little bit of truth. But I don't want to bore you with a lot of questions, Mrs. Tretheroe.

"Oh, that's all right!" replied Mrs. Tretheroe, complacently. "Rather interesting, after all; I suppose you do get a lot of interest in your work, don't you? You ought to," she added, giving her visitor a direct glance out of her half-shut eyes. "You're so very young—a mere boy, I should think!"

"Not quite such a chicken as I look!" retorted Blick, with a laugh. "I've had twelve years of it. But now—business! I'm sure you won't mind if I ask you one or two personal questions, Mrs. Tretheroe? Well, first—I see that on the third finger of your right hand, you wear a somewhat curious ring."

"This!" answered Mrs. Tretheroe. "You may look at it." She stretched out her hand and laid

it, a very slim and shapely member, in Blick's palm. "Odd, isn't it?" she added, as, after a moment, during which she turned her hand over, she withdrew it. "Unusual!"

"It's a very uncommon sort of thing, I should think," replied Blick. "Now, do you know if the late Mr. Guy Markenmore had a ring like that?"

"Of course he had!" she answered. "It was he who bought both rings—years ago. He and I were once together in Portsmouth, and in one of those queer old curiosity shops that you find in those sort of places, we saw these two rings. He bought them, for a pound or two, and we agreed to wear them for ever. Poor Guy!"

"Was he wearing that ring when you saw him the other night?" asked Blick.

"He was! He told me he'd never ceased to wear it—and I assured him that I'd always worn mine."

"He had it on his finger when he left you?"

"Certainly he had!"

"Well—it wasn't there when he was found next morning," said Blick. "That's a fact!"

Mrs. Tretheroe started.

"That wasn't mentioned at the inquest!" she exclaimed.

"No," said Blick. "I didn't know of the ring's existence until Miss Valencia Markenmore told me—after the adjournment. She had noticed that her brother was wearing it when he called at the Court before seeing you."

"And—it was not found on him?"

"It was certainly not found on him."

Mrs. Tretheroe threw away her cigarette. She frowned, and her eyes grew sombre.

"Then—that's another proof that Harborough killed him!" she exclaimed.

"How?" asked Blick.

"Jealousy! He killed him out of jealousy, and took the ring from him when he was dead—mad with jealousy because Guy had something on him connected with me!"

"You really believe, Mrs. Tretheroe, that Harborough killed Guy Markenmore because he was jealous of him—about you?"

"Yes, I do—I'm certain of it!"

"But," said Blick, "Harborough said—you remember his evidence?—that he'd been cured of his—er—passion for you some years ago."

"Don't believe it!" answered Mrs. Tretheroe. "If he had, then it all came back to him when he met me the other afternoon! I saw quite well that Harborough was just as madly in love with me as ever! Then—Guy came along, and—and—well, as I said, he and I made it up quickly. And he met with Harborough up there on the hill-side, and of course they quarrelled, and Harborough killed him! I don't care what you police people say, nor the Coroner and his jury, nor the magistrates—I know!"

"Then you don't pay any attention to the evidence about the two men who were with Mr. Guy Markenmore at the Sceptre that night, Mrs. Tretheroe?"

"Not a bit! A mere business meeting!"

"He didn't tell you whom he was going to meet?"

"Not at all—not one word! Merely a business appointment. I wasn't interested."

"Well," said Blick, after a moment's silence. "There's just another question I want to put to you. You had three or four more guests in your house, I

152 THE MARKENMORE MYSTERY

believe, at that time; you don't think it possible that some one of them was the second man who turned up at the Sceptre?"

"Certainly not!" exclaimed Mrs. Tretheroe. "Of course, I know every one of them, well. Not one of them as much as I knew Guy! They were all military men—men I knew in India. They all had their wives here with them, except, of course, Baron von Eckhardstein—he's not a military man, nor married. But until he came here, to my house-party, he'd never even heard of the Markenmore family. Why!—does somebody suggest this?"

"Not at all!" replied Blick hastily. "But in cases of this sort, when there are strangers about in a place—well, you've got to find out who they were, you know."

"I've told you who my guests were," said Mrs. Tretheroe. "Of course, the mere idea that any of them went to the Sceptre at that time of night is ridiculous. No—the meeting at the Sceptre amounts to nothing. You concentrate on Harborough—he did it! He was always a man of mad, unreasonable, ungovernable temper, or perhaps I might have married him, once."

Blick said nothing in reply to this. He rose to go, and Mrs. Tretheroe, with another approving look, gave him her hand.

"Come and see me again—to tell me how you're getting on," she said. "Of course, I'm awfully interested!"

Blick made his way downstairs. The door of the drawing-room was still open, and the Baron von Eckhardstein was still softly singing sentimental ditties. At the foot of the staircase the maid sud-

denly appeared, and smiled. Blick smiled back.

"I haven't made your mistress's headache any worse," he remarked.

"The headache's too much cigarette smoking," she whispered, with a look. "I say!"

"What?" asked Blick, whispering too.

"Has anything—been found out?" she asked.

"What, yet? No!—too early," answered Blick.

"Why—do you know anything?"

"I? Good Heavens, no! Merely curious! being a woman."

"What's your name?" enquired Blick, with a smile.

"Halliwell," she replied quickly. "Why?"

"Miss or Mrs.?" asked Blick.

"Miss!—What makes you ask?"

"Just wanted to know," said Blick. "I shall be here some time, most likely, and I'm sure to meet you again."

Then, with another smile, he went away, and once clear of the house dismissed everything but one thought. That was an important one. Von Eckhardstein, on leaving the improvised court-room that morning, after the Coroner's adjournment, had possessed himself, in passing the table whereon it was laid, of the tobacco-pipe which had been left at the Sceptre. Now then—was von Eckhardstein the man who had left it there?

Blick had a trick of imagining possible reasons for anything: he began to invent some now. Von Eckhardstein might be one of those folk who have a mania for collecting objects connected with crime—he, Blick, had come across more than one maniac of that sort, and knew that such would stop at nothing,

not even theft, to achieve their desires. Or, he might know the man who had left the pipe, and have quietly abstracted it, in the crush and confusion, with the idea of destroying evidence against a friend. But, anyhow, there the pipe was, in von Eckhardstein's pocket, where he had slipped it on picking it up from the table—and Blick had seen and identified it.

"And if it's his," mused Blick, "then he's the man who went to the Sceptre at two o'clock last Tuesday morning, and left at three-fifteen with Guy Markenmore and the other chap! That's a dead sure thing!"

He strolled back to the Inn, and in due course sat down to his supper. Grimsdale tapped at his door and came in, just as he had finished.

"There's some of the rustics talking about this murder, in the kitchen," he remarked, with a sly smile. "Would you like to hear what they've got to say?"

"They wouldn't talk before me," said Blick.

"I'll put you where you'll not be seen," answered Grimsdale. "Come with me."

He led the detective across the entrance hall, past the bar-parlour, and into a pantry which lay between a private sitting-room and the Inn kitchen. The pantry was unlighted, save for a latticed window set in the kitchen wall; Grimsdale motioned Blick to approach and look through this.

"They can't see you from their side," he whispered. "But you can see and hear everything from this. Listen!"

Blick put his face near the lattice and looked through. Half a dozen labourers, mostly middle-aged or elderly men, sat near a cheery fire in the old-

fashioned kitchen. Pots of ale on the tables before them, pipes of tobacco at their lips. They were all typical rustics, gnarled, weather-beaten, some dull of expression, some uncannily shrewd of eye: one such was just then laying down the law.

"Ain't no manner of doubt as how Master Guy was done to death felonious!" he was saying. "Murder that is, and nobody can say as how 'tain't, sure-ly! But who done that ain't going for to be found so easy as some med make out. Done in a corner, as you med say, and nobody ain't the wiser."

"Somebody murdered he, all same," observed another. "I 'low there ain't no other way o' considering the matter than that. But who he be I dunno, and I be mortal sure nobody else don't know, faith!"

"Well, 'tain't in my conscience for to say as how I b'lieve Master John Harborough, up to Greycloister, done it," said a third man. "I can't bring myself for to agree that a gentleman born 'ud be gettin' out of his bed at three o'clock of a morning for to goo shooting at another gentleman! 'Twould seem a 'nation queer sort of a Christian privilege, would so! Noo—I ain't agoing to consider that, nohow!"

"Then who done it?" asked somebody.

Nobody spoke for awhile; then a dark-faced man, who up to this had sat silently smoking in a corner leaned forward.

"I reckon naught o' these Crowner's quests and a pack o' lawyers and police fellers!" said he, with decision. "Allus goos a-huntin' the wrong hare, they does! Don't us as has lived in these here parts all our lives know well enough that this young man left a pack o' mortal enemies behind him when he

went away, seven years it is agoo? Ain't there men round about here as had sweethearts and lassies whose heads he turned with his ways? Wasn't he allus a-making love to all the good-looking young women? Doon't 'ee tell me!—there's more nor one man this side the downs as 'ud be glad o' the chance of getting his knife into Master Guy Markenmore—or a pistol-bullet, either! That's how he come by his death, so I do think!"

There was a murmur of general assent. An old man's voice arose out of it.

"The ways of Providence be uncommon curious!" he piped. "Shouldn't wonder if what Ben there say be of the nature of truth. Revenge be a mighty strong weapon in a man's right hand, and it do grow all the stronger wi' keeping, like good ale. Aye, sure, it med be a matter o' revenge——"

Blick presently went away, to think over this suggestion. Grimsdale came to him again, looking mysterious.

"There's a young man out there in the garden wants to see you—alone, in secret," he said.

"Who is he?" asked Blick.

Grimsdale gave him a knowing glance:

"One of Mrs. Tretheroe's grooms," he answered.

CHAPTER XIII

WILLIAM PEGGE

The detective instinct which was Blick's second nature rose, strong and eager, when he heard this announcement. He, too, glanced at Grimsdale in knowing fashion.

"Something to tell?" he suggested.

"Didn't say as much to me," answered the landlord, "but I should say so. Came hanging round our side-door till he got a sight of me, and then asked if you were in, and if he could see you, all to yourself—didn't want anybody else to know."

"Bring him in—and tell him nobody will know anything whatever about it," commanded Blick. "Strictly private, eh?"

Grimsdale glanced at the window, and crossing over to it, drew its curtains. He left the room—to return a minute later with a young man in whipcord clothes and smart Newmarket gaiters; a shrewd-eyed, keen-faced fellow who regarded the detective pretty much as he might have regarded a slippery fox just breaking cover.

"William Pegge, Mr. Blick," said Grimsdale.

Blick nodded affably to his shy and watchful visitor, and pointed to a chair close to his own by the cheery fire.

"Good evening, Pegge," he said. "Sit down—will you have a drink?"

Pegge slid into the easy chair, put his hat on the ground, and grinned sheepishly.

"Well, thank you, sir," he answered. "Don't mind a drop of ale."

Blick looked at Grimsdale, who went out and returned with a frothing tankard, which he set down at the groom's elbow.

"See that we're not disturbed, Grimsdale," said Blick. "If anybody—never mind who it is—wants me, say I'm engaged."

The landlord withdrew and closed the door and Blick pushed his tobacco pouch over to his visitor, who was fingering his pipe.

"Try a bit of that," he said hospitably, "and light up. Well—you wanted to have a talk with me, Pegge. What is it?"

Before Pegge replied to this direct invitation, he filled and lighted his pipe, got it fairly going, and lifting the tankard of ale to his lips, murmured an expression of his best respect to his entertainer. Then, with a look round his surroundings, indicative of a desire for strict privacy, he gave Blick a shrewd glance.

"I shouldn't like to get into trouble," he remarked.

"Just so!" agreed Blick. "You won't—through anything that you say to me."

"Nor yet to get anybody else into trouble," continued Pegge. "That is—unless so be as they're deserving of it!"

"Exactly!—unless they're deserving of it," said Blick. "In that case, you wouldn't mind?"

"Don't mind telling what I know to be true," replied Pegge. He looked the detective well over

again. "I s'pose," he went on, "I s'pose that if I tell you—something—I should have to tell it again—as a witness, like?"

"All depends on what it is, Pegge," answered Blick. "You might—if it's very important. Or, you mightn't—if it's merely something that you want to tell me, between ourselves. Anyway, whatever it is, you'll come to no harm—so long as you speak the plain truth."

"Them witnesses, now?" suggested Pegge. "Before crowners, and magistrates, and judges at the 'sises—are they protected? Nobody can't do nothing at 'em for telling what they know, eh?"

"Strictly protected, in every way," said Blick, with emphatic decision. "Bad job for anybody who interfered with a witness, Pegge! Make yourself comfortable on that point, my lad."

Pegge nodded, took another mouthful of ale, and seemed to make up his mind.

"Well, I do know something!" he said suddenly. "I was half in a mind to tell it this morning, up there at the inquest——"

"You were there?" asked Blick.

"Most of the time," assented Pegge. "I heard all that Grimsdale said, anyhow. It was along of what he said that I thought of coming forward, d'ye see, but I didn't exactly know what to do, and so, when I hear 'em talk about an adjournment, I thought I'd put it off, and think matters over. However, when I hear you were stopping here to look after things, I thought I'd mention it to you, like."

"Quite right, Pegge—much obliged to you," said Blick. "Make yourself easy. And now—what is it?"

Pegge removed his pipe from his lips, and leaned a little nearer to his listener.

"Well," he said, "it's like this here. You'd hear what Grimsdale said about Mr. Guy Markenmore coming to this house that night before he was murdered, and being in company with two other gentlemen?"

"Of course," responded Blick, "I heard it."

"One of 'em," continued Pegge, "a tall man—tall as Mr. Harborough? So Grimsdale said—from what he see of him, as they was going away?"

"Yes—I remember," said Blick.

"Well, I'll tell 'ee something," Pegge went on, showing signs of rising interest in his own story. "Grimsdale 'ud tell you that I'm groom at Mrs. Tretheroe's—we've a coachman and two grooms there—I'm head groom. Our mistress has five horses at present—couple of hunters, two carriage horses, and a very good cob. Now, on Monday afternoon, this here cob—'tain't common sort of an animal, for Mrs. Tretheroe, she give a hundred and forty guineas for him only a month since—took ill—colic, or something o' that sort—and I had to fetch the veterinary surgeon to him. The vet., he was at our place for an hour or two that evening a-doctoring of him, and he sort o' pulled him round, but says he to our coachman and the rest of us, 'One of you chaps,' he says, 'I'll have to sit up with this cob all night, and look well after him.' So I offered to do that—t'other two is married men, and lives in the village here; me being a single man, I lives over the stables, d'ye see?"

"I see," said Blick. "You were on the spot."

"On the spot, so to speak," agreed Pegge. "Well, the vet., he leaves us some medicine, and he tells me

what to do, all through the night, with this here cob, and so, when it gets late, and all the rest of 'em had gone, I gets my supper in the servants' hall, and takes a bit o' something to eat during the night, and settles down as comfortable as I could in the saddle-room, next to the loose-box where we had this poorly cob. He went on all right, that cob did—hadn't no trouble with he at all, and he's right now—quite fit again. However, that's neither here nor there, in a way of speaking—what I mention the cob for is to show you how I come to be up all that Monday night, d'ye see?"

"I understand," said Blick. "It's all clear, Pegge. Go ahead!"

"Well," continued Pegge, "there's nothing happens till about a quarter to two o'clock in the morning. I know it was that 'cause I had to keep looking at the cob every so often from the time the vet. left him, and that was one of the times. I'd just been into his loose-box, and come out when I remembered that I'd no tobacco left in my pouch. But I had plenty in a tin in my bedroom, so I went off to fetch it. Now then, you must understand that our stabling at the Dower House is separated from the drive by a high hedge of macrocarpus trees—shrubbery, d'ye see? I was going along this hedge side, between it and the coach-house wall, on my way to the stairs that leads up to my bedroom, when I hear somebody coming down the drive, t'other side the hedge—soft, like. So I stops, dead——"

"Wait a minute," interrupted Blick. "What were you walking on, yourself, Pegge? What sort of a pavement, or path?"

"Asphalt—laid down recent," answered Pegge,

promptly. "Runs all along the front of our stabling. Put down when Mrs. Tretheroe came and had things smartened up."

"And what had you on your feet—what sort of shoes?"

"Pair of old tennis shoes that the housekeeper had given me," replied Pegge. "Some gentleman had left 'em behind him."

"Very well," said Blick. "Go on. You stopped dead——"

"Stopped just where I was, stole in between the bushes, and looked into the drive. Then I see a man coming down it, from the side of the house, where there's a door by which you can get out into the back gardens. He come right past me, walking on the grass path at the side of the gravel roadway."

"You saw him clearly?"

"Considering it was night—a clear night, though—I see him as clearly as what I see you! That is—with a bit of difference, like."

"You saw him clearly enough to know who he was?"

"I did!"

"Well?" asked Blick, eyeing his informant closely. "Who was he?"

Pegge looked with equal closeness at his questioner.

"That German gentleman that's staying with our missis!" he answered.

"Baron von Eckhardstein?"

"That's him! The Baron we calls him."

"You're absolutely certain of this, Pegge?"

"Take my dying oath of it!" asserted Pegge.

Blick refilled and lighted his pipe, and smoked in silence for a minute or two.

"Well," he said at last, "where did he go?"

"Went a few yards down the drive, and then turned into a path that goes through the shrubberies towards the main road," replied Pegge. "It comes out into the main road very nearly opposite the cottages, just beyond this place—the Sceptre. There's a little iron swing-gate in the holly-hedge—you'll maybe have noticed it? He'd come on to the road through that—about two hundred yards from here."

"And you say that was at about a quarter to two, Tuesday morning?"

"At all about that," affirmed Pegge. "It would be about six or eight minutes to, when I see him. 'Twas a quarter to, anyway, when I see the cob, and I wasn't in his box many minutes. Then I went straight to get my tobacco-tin, and heard these foot-steps."

"I suppose you thought it was a queer thing—a guest going out of the house at that time of night, didn't you?" suggested Blick.

"Uncommon queer, I thought!" agreed Pegge. "But then, 'twasn't any concern of mine. And I shouldn't ha' taken much more notice of it if I hadn't see him again."

"Oh!" said Blick. "Ah! You did see him again, then?"

"I did—and when it was getting light, too—see him clear enough that time!"

"And what time was that?"

"We've a clock over our stables," said Pegge. "It had just struck four."

"Four o'clock!" repeated Blick meditatively. "Um! And where did you see him at four o'clock? Same place?"

"No," replied Pegge. "Just before four o'clock I began to feel as if I could do with a cup of tea. I'd got a teapot with some tea in it, but, of course, I wanted boiling water. Now, we've a gas-stove in a little room at the end of the stables that our coachman uses as a sort of sitting-room for himself, d'ye see, so I went off there to light it, and boil some water in a kettle. It struck four while I was in there. I'd just put on the kettle, when I heard it strike four. Now, there's a window in that little room as looks out on the back gardens—they run from the back of the Dower House to the foot of the park, where it begins to rise towards the downs. There's a thick plantation of pine and larch between the gardens and the park, and I suddenly see this here Baron come out of it, as if he'd come down from the high ground above."

"Was he alone?" asked Blick.

"Oh, he was alone, right enough, just as before," replied Pegge.

"How far away were you from him?"

"Twenty-five or thirty yards."

"Where did he go that time?"

"Walked down the side of a big holly-hedge towards the same door that I reckon he'd come out of."

"Could he be seen from the house?"

"No—I reckon not," said Pegge. "There's a thick belt of trees—beeches, just come into leaf—between the house and those gardens."

"You saw him pass that?"

"Saw him go into it," said Pegge. "Once through it, he'd be close to that side-door I spoke of."

"I suppose you know the Dower House pretty well, Pegge?" asked Blick.

"Yes," asserted Pegge. "I was there before Mrs. Tretheroe came and took it. Been there, off and on, ever since I was a young 'un. Went there first when I was fourteen."

"Well, that side-door, now? What is it. Where does it lead, when you get in?"

"Into a lobby that runs along the back of the house. There's a staircase opens from it—a wide staircase—that comes out, through a double door at the top, into the big staircase in the hall."

"So that anybody coming from the bedrooms could easily get at it?"

"Easy enough!" assented Pegge.

"I suppose there'd be none of the servants about at four o'clock in the morning?" enquired Blick, after a moment's thought.

Pegge opened his mouth in a broad grin.

"Not likely!" he said. "Servants' getting-up bell goes at six o'clock. Catch any of 'em being up before that!"

"Talking about servants," observed Blick, "do you know Mrs. Tretheroe's maid?"

Pegge smiled.

"Daffy Halliwell?" he answered. "Course I do!"

"Well, and who is Daffy Halliwell? And what's her proper Christian name?"

"Daphne," said Pegge promptly. "Who is she? Why, her father was a bit of a farmer t'other side of the downs, beyond Markenmore Hollow. Dead now he is. There was two o' them girls—Daffy and Myra. Daffy went out to India with Mrs. Tretheroe,

and come back with her. Myra—I don't know what's become o' she. Disappeared, like, just about that time—though I recollect now she was going to be married to a chap as lived near them—Jim Roper, woodman, to Sir Anthony."

Blick paid little attention to these details; he was thinking over the principal points of the groom's information.

"Now, Pegge," he said a moment later, "an important question—am I the first person to whom you've told this story?"

"You're the very first!" replied Pegge promptly. "I haven't mentioned it to a soul but you!"

"Didn't ever remark to any of your fellow-servants that you'd seen Baron von Eckhardstein out at that time of the morning?" suggested Blick.

"No!" affirmed Pegge. "I'll not deny that I might ha' done, just in a casual way, if I hadn't heard of Mr. Guy Markenmore's murder that morning. But I did hear of it, very early—earlier than most folks—before either our coachman or the second groom came to the stables—so I said nothing."

"Who told you of the murder—so early?" asked Blick.

"Our village policeman," replied Pegge. "I was standing at the end of our east walk when he and Hobbs went up the hill-side to the downs; Hobbs had been to fetch him. I should have gone up with them to Markenmore Hollow if I could have left the cob. I'd just walked along to the edge of our grounds, like, to get a bit of fresh air after being all night in the saddle-room, when the policeman and Hobbs hurried by. And putting one thing to another, I

thought I'd hold my tongue. And I have done—till now.”

“And at last you thought you'd tell me? Well, you've done right,” said Blick. “No harm'll come to you, Pegge—you're safe enough.”

“Well, I'd a reason why I come to you tonight,” remarked Pegge, with a sudden shrewd look. “I reckoned up that it was best.”

“Yes? Now, why?” asked Blick.

“Because this here Baron is off tomorrow morning,” replied Pegge. “Leaving!”

“Ah!” exclaimed Blick. “What time?”

“I've orders to drive him to Selcaster railway station to catch the 10.8 express to Victoria,” said Pegge. “We shall leave here at half-past nine.”

“There's a Mrs. Hamilton there at the Dower House, isn't there?” asked Blick. “A friend of Mrs. Tretheroe's? Is she leaving, too?”

“No,” answered Pegge. “Just him. I'm driving him in the dogcart. Only him.”

Blick rose from his chair as a sign that the interview was over.

“Very well, Pegge,” he said. “Now then, just remember this—not a word to any living soul! Just go on as if everything was ordinary. You'll hear from me. You did right to come, and remember what I say—keep all to yourself!”

When the groom had gone, after taking amusing precautions to make sure that no customer of the Sceptre saw him leave the detective's sitting-room, Blick thought over what he had just heard. There was no doubt in his mind now that the Baron von Eckhardstein was the second man of the midnight meeting at the Sceptre; Pegge's story, and his own

knowledge that von Eckhardstein had abstracted the pipe from the solicitor's table at the inquest, convinced him of that. But was that sufficient to make one suspect him of murder? Blick thought not—emphatically not. He could scarcely believe it possible that a man would murder another, remain in close proximity to the scene of the murder, and generally act as von Eckhardstein seemed to have acted. Yet—he might know something; probably did, and whether there was sufficient grounds or not for accusing him of actual guilt or complicity, there were certainly plenty for requesting him to give some account of himself. If such a request were suddenly sprung upon him, there might be revelations.

“I’ll have something out of him!” muttered Blick. “Something he must know—and he’ll have to speak!”

With that resolve strong in his mind he sought Grimsdale, ordered breakfast for seven-thirty sharp next morning, and bade the landlord have a cab ready to carry him into Seleaster at eight o’clock.

CHAPTER XIV

GONE

These matters arranged and dismissed from his thoughts, Blick, having had enough of business for that night, turned into the bar-parlour of the Sceptre, minded for a little relaxation before retiring to bed. He had been in there once or twice since taking up his quarters at the inn; usually there were two or three Markenmore men to be found round the fire, a farmer or two, the miller, the carpenter, the blacksmith, engaged in discussing the latest news of the village; Blick liked to hear them talk. But on this occasion the room was almost empty; there was in fact, nobody in it but a little, meek-and-mild looking man in a tweed knickerbocker suit, who sat thoughtful and solitary near the hearth, and turned an unusually large pair of spectacles on the detective with a sort of apologetic look. He moved his chair back a little, as if to invite Blick to the cheery blaze.

"Thank you," said Blick. He dropped into a chair facing the stranger and drew out his pipe and tobacco. "A bit of fire's quite welcome, though we're nearly in May," he opened.

"Very welcome indeed, sir," responded the other. "Especially when you've been out in the open all day!"

"Been walking?" asked Blick, with a glance at the stranger's knickerbockers.

"I have, sir! Done thirty miles today before I came to this place," replied the stranger. "Right across the downs. I always take a holiday twice a year—early spring and late autumn—and spend it pedestrianizing. Run all over this particular part of the South in my time. But I never came to this particular village until today. And I confess that what led me here—for in the ordinary way I should have put up at Selcester—was curiosity! I read in the newspapers about this Markenmore mystery—so being near, I thought I'd like to see the place."

"Queer business, isn't it?" said Blick.

"Queer indeed, sir!" agreed the stranger. "You're interested in it, sir?"

"Got to be," answered Blick laconically. "Professionally."

The stranger brought his big spectacles to bear on Blick and regarded him with rapt attention. Then he bent forward and spoke in a hushed voice.

"Is it possible, sir, that I have the pleasure of meeting the famous Detective-Sergeant Blick, whose name I have heard in connection with this case?" he asked almost reverentially. "Do I see Mr. Blick in the flesh?"

"You do!" replied Blick. "All there is of him!"

"Bless me!" exclaimed the stranger. "Very proud, I'm sure, to meet you, sir. My name's Crawley—I come from Tooting. Rate-collector, Mr. Blick—an arduous and humdrum occupation, sir, but it keeps me in form for walking, of which exercise I'm passionately fond. Dear me! Now, it may seem an extraordinary thing, but do you know, sir, in the course of my five-and-forty years of existence I have

never met a gentleman of your profession before! A very exciting and engrossing profession, I believe, sir—quite adventurous?”

“Depends,” said Blick. “Dull and monotonous enough, sometimes. You can, of course, get excitement and adventure out of a problem in mathematics—but there isn’t much of either in doing a long sum of compound addition, is there?”

Mr. Crawley looked his admiration—and his failure to comprehend.

“I mean,” added Blick, “that our job is very often one of adding this to that, and that to this—until you’ve got a total.”

“Very good, sir, very good—I see your meaning!” said Mr. Crawley, rubbing his hands. “Oh, very good indeed, sir—an excellent illumination! It wouldn’t be fair of me, I suppose, to ask if you’ve arrived at a total in this Markenmore problem, Mr. Blick?”

“I can soon answer that for you,” said Blick. “I haven’t!”

“A very stiff nut to crack, I should think, sir,” remarked Mr. Crawley. “I read all the evidence in the paper—the *Daily Sentinel*, Mr. Blick—as I sat on a hill-side eating my modest lunch: very interesting indeed—more interesting, sir, than any of those sensational novels that people borrow from the libraries—oh, much more! Real life, sir!”

“Make anything out of it?” suggested Blick. “Got any opinion?”

Mr. Crawley glanced at the door and lowered his voice.

“I have opinions, Mr. Blick,” he answered. “Yes,

172 THE MARKENMORE MYSTERY

sir, I have opinions. I am not a betting man, sir, but I would lay money that I know what is at the bottom of this affair!"

"Aye? What, now?" asked Blick. "Always glad of an idea."

"Money!" said Mr. Crawley solemnly. "Money, sir—money!"

"Just—how?" enquired Blick.

Mr. Crawley took off his spectacles, revealed a pair of weak, dreamy eyes, and shook his head.

"I think the unfortunate young man, Mr. Guy Markenmore—queer name, sir!—was followed. Tracked!" he answered. "Tracked, sir! With money at the bottom of it—yes!"

"Do you mean that he was robbed as well as murdered?" asked Blick.

"No, sir—I don't mean that at all," said Mr. Crawley with emphatic decision. "I observed that Mr. Guy Markenmore's property and money were left untouched. No—I mean that money is at the bottom of the mystery of his murder—that he was murdered by some evil person who will benefit by his death—in a pecuniary sense, Mr. Blick, a pecuniary sense. I may be wrong," concluded Mr. Crawley; "I may be wholly and entirely wrong—but, on the evidence, sir, such is my opinion. And I have served on a jury—more than once."

"I shouldn't wonder if there's a good deal in what you say," admitted Blick. "There's generally some question of money at the bottom of all these things. However," he added, as he pulled out his watch and yawned in the act, "up to now I've got precious little light on the subject—perhaps I'll get a bit more tomorrow."

Then, with a laughing remark that even detectives must sleep occasionally, he bade Mr. Crawley good night and went off to bed.

Mr. Crawley flung him a last remark as he left the room, accompanied by a wag of his forefinger.

"Don't forget, Mr. Blick—though a gentleman of your ability and experience needs no reminding of it, I'm sure—don't forget that it's always the unexpected that happens! The unexpected, sir!—Ah, there's a great deal in the unexpected! No one knows, sir, what the morrow may not bring forth!"

"Guess you're about right there, Mr. Crawley," asserted Blick. "You've hit it in one this time!"

He had no idea of what the morrow would bring forth, neither then, nor when he presently fell fast asleep, nor when he woke in the morning, nor when, at eight o'clock, he climbed up into the trap in which Grimsdale was to drive him into Selcaster. Mr. Crawley, who had also breakfasted early, stood at the Inn door when Blick emerged; he was equipped for walking, and was fastening a small satchel on his shoulders.

"Off?" enquired Blick.

"Only for the day, sir," replied Mr. Crawley. "I am going to have a full and glorious day on the downs—behold the receptacle of my lunch! And I am so well satisfied with the Sceptre, Mr. Blick, that I propose to make it my headquarters for the rest of my holiday, so I shall perhaps have the pleasure of seeing you tonight, sir—when," he added in a whisper, "I trust the day may have brought forth!—profitably, eh?"

"You never know your luck!" responded Blick.

He said little to the landlord as they drove into

Selcaster, but when they came to the ancient Market Cross in the middle of the old city, he laid a hand on his arm.

“Grimsdale,” he said, “pull up, and set me down here. I’m going to see the Chief Constable—I’ll walk along the street. And listen—I want you to stop in Selcaster a bit. Be down at the station at ten o’clock sharp. I’ll see you there.”

He got out of the trap and went off in the direction of the Chief Constable’s office, and Grimsdale turned into the big courtyard of the Mitre, to wait until the appointed time. At five minutes to ten he went down to the station, and handing over his horse and trap to the care of the boy, walked upon the up platform. The London express was nearly due, and, as usual, there were many passengers awaiting its arrival: the platform was thronged. But Grimsdale was quick to observe that Blick was there, and that near him, mingling with the crowd, were two or three plainclothes policemen of the local force; clearly Blick was expecting somebody. And Grimsdale, a bit of straw protruding from his lips, watched, keen-eyed and observant.

Ten o’clock chimed from the many towers in the city, and nothing had happened. In five minutes more the big express would come thundering in; in eight it would have glided away again on its sixty-mile run to London. At one minute past ten Mr. Blick, who was keeping a sharp watch on the booking-office, left the platform and went outside the station. As he emerged on the open space in front, William Pegge, driving Mrs. Tretheroe’s smart dog-cart, came racing up—alone.

Pegge singled Blick out from the folk who hung

about the station doors and pulled up right before him. The detective was at the side of the dog-cart in an instant. His eyes went to the vacant seat at the groom's side.

"Where is he?" he asked in a sharp whisper.

Pegge bent down.

"Gone!" he answered. "Hooked it during the night! Nobody in his room this morning; clean disappeared! Mrs. Tretheroe sent me in to tell the police—she says something's happened to him."

"Happened to him? What does she mean?" growled Blick.

Pegge bent still lower. As he spoke they heard the express coming—it entered the station behind them with a roar and a rattle that died away into the hiss of escaping steam as the engine pulled up and came to its brief rest.

"I heard Mrs. Tretheroe say to the housekeeper that the Baron often went out walking very late at night," he answered. "She said he's a bad sleeper, and goes out walking to make himself sleep. I made out that she thought he'd gone out that way during the night, and she believes he's had an accident, or something of that sort. She's sending folk round for him, and I'm to tell the police here."

"Wait a minute," said Blick. The people who had got out of the express were coming from the exits; he moved out of their way. "You've no idea what time he went out?" he asked, glancing at Pegge.

"I've no idea," replied Pegge. "I did hear that he went to bed at his usual time, but——" He paused. Grimsdale had come bustling up and was tapping Blick's elbow. Blick turned quickly. Grimsdale pointed to a tall man who had just

emerged from the station and stood at its principal entrance looking about him.

"There!" said Grimsdale. "That man! That's him—the man who came to the Sceptre on Monday night—the American!"

At that moment the tall man caught sight of Grimsdale, started, smiled, nodded, and came hastily across.

"Hello, landlord!" he said. "The very man I was waiting to see! Say!—how's this affair about Guy Markenmore going on? I've travelled all night to reach this city so that I could tell about things—never heard of it myself till yesterday evening, right down at Falmouth! Have they laid hands on anybody?"

Grimsdale was looking from the stranger to Blick, and Blick hastened to speak.

"Are you the man with whom Guy Markenmore had supper at the Sceptre last Monday midnight?" he asked abruptly. "The man who booked a room there and never occupied it?"

"I am that man," replied the stranger, with a ready nod and smile. "No other!"

"Do you mind telling me who you are?" asked Blick. "And what you are?"

"I do not! My name is Edward Lansbury, and I'm a financier, with businesses in New York and in London. Who are you and what's your business?"

"Detective-Sergeant Blick, of the Criminal Investigation Department, New Scotland Yard! I have this case in hand, Mr. Lansbury, and I'll be glad if you'll tell me what you know about it."

"Sure! Everything! That's what I've run up from Falmouth for. Where'll we talk?"

"Come this way," said Blick. The plain-clothes men had come up behind him; he turned and whispered to them, and they went away in the direction of the police-station. "Don't wait for me, Grimsdale," he continued. "I shall be detained here for some time, so you can go back at once."

But Grimsdale brought a hand out of his pocket, offering something to Lansbury.

"Your change, sir," he said. "Three pound fourteen. Bill was twenty-six shillings, sir."

Lansbury started, laughed, took the money, and handed some of the silver back.

"Guess I'd forgotten all about that!" he said. "Here!—get yourself a drink."

"Thought you had, sir," remarked Grimsdale, phlegmatic as ever. "Thank you, sir."

He went over to his trap and drove off, and Blick signed to his companion to follow him towards the Chief Constable's office.

"I'm truly thankful you came, Mr. Lansbury," he said, as they walked up the street. "Everything's in more or less of a fog about this affair!"

"Well, beyond what I know myself—which is not a great deal—all I know of it has been got from a London paper that I picked up in my hotel at Falmouth yesterday evening," said Lansbury. "I set off here almost at once—been on the train practically all night. What's the latest development?"

"The latest development," replied Blick, "is one of which I've only heard within the last few minutes. Do you know the Baron von Eckhardstein?"

"Sure! I know him well. He was with me and Markenmore at the little inn that night—I left Markenmore and him together at three o'clock or so, Tues-

day morning. Von Eckhardstein, of course, was the tall man that the landlord saw us walk up the road with—as, I saw, the landlord mentioned in his evidence.”

“Well—von Eckhardstein has disappeared! During this last night. Clean gone! I suppose you don’t know anything about that?”

“Less than nothing! But what’s all this about? Seems to me——”

“Wait a bit,” interrupted Blick. “We’ll be alone with the Chief Constable in a minute. Then—tell me all you know. We want it!”

The Chief Constable, to whom Blick had sent a message by the plain-clothes men, was awaiting him and the new-comer in his private office. He looked at Lansbury with considerable interest, and suddenly asked a direct question.

“Are you the Mr. Edward Lansbury who had a good deal to do with the Vilona Real Estate Development Company some few years ago?” he enquired. “You are, eh? Um!—I’ve got a pretty fair holding in that—very profitable it’s been, too. And what can you tell of this Markenmore affair, Mr. Lansbury? We shall be very glad to know.”

Lansbury dropped into an easy chair at the side of the Chief Constable’s desk, and put the tips of his fingers together.

“Well,” he said, “I’ll tell you all that I can tell—that is, all that I actually know. As regards the actual murder of Guy Markenmore, seems like it amounts to nothing; as regards what happened just before it, well, you must make out of that what you can! All I can tell you is as to what took place at the Sceptre Inn.”

"And why you, Markenmore, and von Eckhardstein met there," said Blick quietly.

"Sure! Well, as to why we met there," continued Lansbury. "As I told you at the railway station just now, I am a financier. I have business interests in this country as well as in my own. I have an office in London, just as I have an office in New York. Naturally I know a great many financial operators in both countries. I knew Guy Markenmore well enough—a smart man who had done well. I know von Eckhardstein, not so well, but sufficiently. He, of course, is better known than I am, or than Markenmore was—known in London, Paris, and Vienna."

"A German, I suppose?" asked the Chief Constable.

"No—von Eckhardstein is an Austrian," said Lansbury. "Well—I have had dealings with these two—separately, you understand, never together—on various occasions, and always found them very good, straight men of business. Now, very recently, Markenmore wrote to me that he had a business deal on in which I should find it profitable to join, with the idea of developing its results in the States. He told me in a letter what it was—but I do not wish, at present, to tell you, for the thing is a most important secret. I will, of course, tell if it becomes necessary to do so in the interests of justice: that is, if my telling the precise details will help in the arrest of Markenmore's murderer. But just now I would rather not say, and it's not relative to the pertinent matter. It's sufficient to tell you that Markenmore had the chance—an option, in fact—of buying a certain something from a certain somebody, and he

invited me to go in with him; his proposition was that I should acquire one-third, he would take up another, and we would find a third man to buy the remaining third. We had a little correspondence about the thing to be purchased—I may tell you that that thing was a trade secret. While we had this correspondence, Markenmore was in London, and I was at either Southampton or at Falmouth—I have business at both places just now. Now, about the middle of last week, Markenmore wrote to me and said that as I was at Southampton, would I meet him at the Sceptre Inn, Markenmore, Selcaster, on the next Monday night?—he was going to Markenmore Court that evening, he said, on family business, and would join me at the Sceptre when it was over—at ten-thirty or so. We fixed this up. I came on from Southampton by an evening train, walked out to Markenmore, booked a room at the Sceptre, and ordered supper for two. While it was being got ready, I took a walk outside—I had been kept indoors a great deal for some days in a close-atmosphered place, and I was enjoying the fresh air. I strolled outside this village of Markenmore, and I met von Eckhardstein.”

“A moment,” interrupted Blick. “What time was that?”

“It would be between nine-thirty and ten, as near as I can remember,” replied Lansbury.

“Dark, then?”

“Oh, quite dark! I should not have seen von Eckhardstein but for the fact that I struck a match to light my cigar. He saw me—he was leaning against a gate, close by. He hailed me, and after I had expressed my surprise at our meeting, told me

that he was the guest of a lady in the village. Then he wanted to know what I was doing there. It immediately occurred to me that he was the very man to take up the remaining one-third share I have mentioned to you, so I told him my business. I also explained the proposition, and told him what Markenmore and I proposed to do."

"Another question," said Blick. "Did von Eckhardstein know Markenmore? Had they ever had any dealings?"

"I do not think they had—no. As to knowing each other, I daresay they may have been, and probably were, familiar with each other's name, as financiers. But I am sure that until that night they had never known each other personally."

"That," remarked Blick, "is precisely what I wanted to know. Go on!"

CHAPTER XV

WAS IT ROBBERY?

Lansbury smiled at the note of eagerness in the detective's voice. He leaned forward in his chair, looking from one to the other of his listeners as if to indicate that he was now coming to the really important part of his story.

"Go back a bit, you mean," he said with a laugh "to my meeting with von Eckhardstein. Well, as I said, I explained the proposition to him. We walked along the road, leading outward from Mark-enmore, for some time, discussing matters. We——"

"Meet anybody—see anybody?" interrupted Blick.

"I don't remember that we encountered a soul!" answered Lansbury. "Pretty lonely parts, those. We walked up that road, perhaps a mile; then turned and came back to about where we'd met. By that time we'd got on to other topics than that which I'd first mentioned. Von Eckhardstein was not greatly taken with the matter I put before him. He saw its value as a commercial proposition, but while he felt that it would materialize well in this country and in mine, he was not so sure if he could make it a big thing in the mid-European countries, because of certain German opposition. However, he neither said yes nor no: and when we were about to part he asked me where I was staying, and what time I'd be

likely to go to bed. I told him I had put up at the Sceptre Inn, close by, and that I expected Markenmore there about ten-thirty to eleven, to supper, and that he and I would be sure to sit up late as we'd a good deal to talk about. Von Eckhardstein then told me a thing which may be of some significance to you police people, now that things have turned out as they have. He said that he was suffering badly from insomnia; couldn't sleep at night—at any rate as he ought to—and that since coming to this place where he was visiting, he'd frequently gone out long walks in the middle of the night to see if he could induce sleep. He said that if he so went out that night, and if, in the meantime, he'd changed his mind about the proposition I'd put before him, he'd likely drop in on Markenmore and myself if he saw a light in my sitting-room window. So——”

“From his last remark you gathered that he knew the Sceptre?” enquired Blick. “Enough to know where your sitting-room was, eh?”

“Well, that's what he said, anyhow,” replied Lansbury. “As for my sitting-room, it was one which the landlord showed me into when I stepped into his house—a biggish room on the left-hand side of the hall, with a French window that opened on the front garden.”

“Precisely,” said Blick. “I'm occupying that room, now. Well——?”

“Well, we parted on that,” continued Lansbury. “Von Eckhardstein turned into a little gate that led, I suppose, to the house where he was staying, and I strolled back to the Sceptre. I sat down and waited for Markenmore. He was very late in coming; in fact, he didn't come until close on twelve o'clock.

He was in very high spirits—he told me, as we sat at supper, that he'd met his old sweetheart (handsomest woman in England, he called her!), and that they were both so pleased to meet again that they'd fixed it up to be married right off, and I'd have to be his best man. Then we got on to business, and I mentioned von Eckhardstein. Of course he knew all about von Eckhardstein, and he said that von Eckhardstein was staying with this lady, he, Markenmore, was going to marry, though he hadn't met him then, being more pleasantly engaged. We went on discussing our business until close on two o'clock in the morning. Just about that time I heard the latch of the garden gate snap, and guessing that was von Eckhardstein out on one of his nocturnal rambles, I opened the French window and stepped into the garden. There he was, coming across the bit of lawn, and I took him in and introduced him to Markenmore, and we began to re-discuss the business proposition. That——”

“A moment, if you please!” interrupted Blick. “Before you tell us about that, will you answer a question which has just occurred to me? During the time you three were together, did Markenmore ever mention his approaching marriage to von Eckhardstein? I want to know—particularly.”

“No, I am sure he did not,” replied Lansbury promptly. “While the three of us were together, nothing but the immediate business proposition was discussed. What Markenmore may have said on that subject—if he said anything—to von Eckhardstein later, when I parted from them and left them together, I can't presume to speculate on, but during the hour or so in which we were all in company, nothing was

talked of but business. Now, without telling you the exact details of the secret, I'll tell what that business was. A young fellow who lived in a small country town between this city and London, getting in touch with Markenmore as a financial man, offered him a trade secret which he was anxious to sell outright, for strict cash, for a certain amount of money that he required to set himself up in business. The amount asked was three thousand pounds. It was a good bargain—a very good bargain. The advantage was on the side of the purchaser—but the young fellow had fixed his own price and would evidently be well content if he got it. After von Eckhardstein came to the Sceptre we all three talked the matter out—Markenmore had the papers and showed them—and we decided to buy: that is, von Eckhardstein decided to come in, for Markenmore and myself had already made up our minds. We then settled matters: von Eckhardstein and myself each giving Markenmore a thousand pounds in notes as our shares——”

“Do I understand that you each gave Markenmore one thousand pounds, in notes, there and then?” asked Blick abruptly. “Notes?”

“Why, certainly!” answered Lansbury. “That’s just what I said. Bank of England notes. To which, of course, he added a similar sum of his own—to make up the three thousand. What’s surprising you?”

“Do you mean to say that all three of you were carrying large sums of money on you—like those?” asked Blick. “Walking about with as much as a thousand pounds on you?”

“That’s no great sum to carry,” replied Lansbury. “Men in our line have to carry a good deal of ready

money about them. A thousand pounds doesn't take up much room in a wallet."

"There would be notes of big denominations, I suppose?" suggested the Chief Constable.

"Exactly!" assented Lansbury. "Mostly so, at any rate. Notes of five hundred or two hundred each. I remember that von Eckhardstein handed over two notes of five hundred. Mine were smaller—four two hundreds, one one hundred, and two fifties, I don't know anything of Markenmore's—he simply put our money to his in an envelope with the rest of the papers."

"Why notes at all?" asked Blick, in whom an absolutely new train of thought was now developing. "Why could not this transaction have been settled by a cheque?"

"Because the young fellow of whom I have told you—the seller—particularly wanted his money in notes," replied Lansbury. "I said he lives in a small town between this city of yours and London. Well, Markenmore was going to call on him on his way back, hand him the cash, and the thing was settled. Do you get that?"

Blick was beginning to manifest a certain restlessness. He got out of his chair, put his hands in his pockets, and began to pace the room with bent head. Suddenly he twisted round on Lansbury.

"Then, when Guy Mackenmore went out of that inn, the Sceptre, at three o'clock on Tuesday morning, he'd three thousand pounds, in Bank of England notes, on him?" he said. "Is that a fact?"

"Sure!" replied Lansbury. "He had!"

Blick gave the Chief Constable a significant look and snapped out a significant word.

“Robbery!”

The Chief Constable nodded. He, too, was beginning to see developments.

“Looks like it,” he said. “Murdered for what he had on him. And yet——” he paused, looking at the detective with professional appeal. “Odd,” he went on, “that everything else was untouched.”

“That makes things all the more significant,” observed Blick. He turned to Lansbury. “Did you see where Markenmore put the money—the bank-notes—and the papers you referred to just now?” he asked.

“I did! In the inner breast pocket of his coat.”

“Just put them in—as one puts letters, or anything of that sort, into one’s pocket?”

“Sure!”

“Did he ever leave that room in which you were all three sitting until you all left it for good?”

“He did not! None of us did.”

“Well,” said Blick, after a pause, during which he appeared to be deep in reflection. “What happened after you’d finished this business?”

“Nothing unusual. We talked a bit, had a whisky and soda, lighted a fresh cigar, perhaps——”

“Ah!” remarked Blick. “That reminds me of another question. Were you all smoking cigars?”

“No,” replied Lansbury. “Von Eckhardstein was smoking a pipe. He said cigars made his insomnia worse.”

“Well—you left at about three o’clock, I think?” suggested Blick.

“About that. Markenmore was going across country to a station called Mitbourne: we said we would walk a little way with him. We left by the

188 THE MARKENMORE MYSTERY

French window: it was then beginning to get grey in the sky—you could see things. We walked up the road, past the village cross and the old church. A little further on, I remembered that I had bought a local railway time-table at Selcester on arriving there the previous evening. I pulled it out, and on consulting it, found that I could get a train at Selcester soon after four o'clock which would get me to Southampton and Salisbury, and thence on to Falmouth. I decided to catch it, and said I shouldn't bother about returning to the inn. Markenmore then pointed out a footpath which, he said, led across the meadows to Selcester, and advised me to take it; he himself, he remarked, was going by another, exactly opposite, on the other side of the road, which made a short cut over the downs to Mitbourne station. We then bade each other farewell, and parted. I took the footpath to Selcester; Markenmore took the other, up the hill-side; von Eckhardstein went with him, observing that he would walk a little more before turning in. The last I saw of them they were rounding the corner of a high hedge, together, in close conversation."

"And that's all you know?" said Blick.

"That is all I know," answered Lansbury. "All!"

A pause in the conversation ensued: Blick began to pace the room again, thinking. The Chief Constable, who, during the whole of Lansbury's narrative, had occupied himself in drawing apparently aimless lines on his blotting-pad, laid down his pen, sat back in his chair, and stared at the ceiling; he, too, was apparently in deep thought. But it was he who first broke the silence.

"I suppose von Eckhardstein is a wealthy man?" he said, turning to Lansbury.

"He enjoys that reputation in financial circles," replied Lansbury. "You may safely say he is!"

"Not likely to murder another man for a couple of thousand pounds?"

"I should say not!"

"Well," remarked the Chief Constable, with a glance at Blick, "it now looks as if Guy Markenmore was murdered for—not two, but three thousand pounds! Anyway, according to you, Mr. Lansbury, he'd that sum on him when you left him at, say, half-past three, and it wasn't on him when his clothing was examined by Blick there, a very few hours later! Who got it? Where is it?"

Blick turned in his walk and came back to the hearth by which they were talking.

"Have you got the numbers of the notes you gave to Markenmore?" he asked. "I suppose you have, of course!"

"I have not," replied Lansbury. "Careless, perhaps, but that's so—I haven't. But I reckon my bankers may have them—they enter numbers when paying them out, don't they?"

"Who are your bankers?" asked Blick.

"International Banking Corporation—London office in Bishopsgate," replied Lansbury promptly. "But I can't be certain that I got those particular notes there. I may have—in which case, they will have. But I mayn't—in which case they won't have. Those notes—or some of them—may have been paid to me by other people. And—once or twice, recently—I have cashed cheques for large amounts in other places than London. My financial operations are considerable, and I handle notes in large numbers."

"All the same," said Blick, "we'll have to do what

we can in tracing those notes. But now we're faced with another matter. Von Eckhardstein is missing. His hostess thinks he's had an accident while out on one of his night walks. I don't!—I think he's run away."

"Why, now, Blick?" asked the Chief Constable.

"Why didn't he come forward at the inquest and tell us what Mr. Lansbury has just told us?" answered Blick. "He'd the chance!—and he sat there and said nothing. Von Eckhardstein knows something—and he must be found. I wish I'd laid hands on him last night. Now, we must get to work on tracking him. You'd better come out with me to Markenmore, and let's see into things."

"I hope you don't want me?" said Lansbury. "I am particularly anxious to get back to Falmouth. But I shall return from Falmouth in two days, and shall then be for several days at Southampton—close by you."

"Leave us an address—or addresses—that will find you at short notice," said Blick. "There's no need to keep you from your business, Mr. Lansbury. And we'd better be getting to work on our own!"

He presently hurried the Chief Constable off to Markenmore and Mrs. Tretheroe. The events and revelations of the morning had given him an entirely new conception of the case in hand, and he was now blaming himself bitterly for not having asked von Eckhardstein to account for his possession of the pipe as soon as he had discovered that it was in the financier's overcoat pocket.

"But I was saving that up for this morning," he said grumblingly, as he and the Chief Constable drove along to Markenmore. "I meant to stop him as he

was entering the station to catch that ten-eight express; tell him that you and I wanted some information from him, to get him to your office, and have things out with him. Now—it's too late!"

"You don't know that yet, Blick," remarked the Chief Constable. "If this man was accustomed to strolling about at night he may easily have had an accident, and be lying in some lonely part of those downs or woods waiting for help. Anyhow, so far, I don't see anything to incriminate him—in my opinion."

"He was the last man known to be with Guy Markenmore," said Blick.

"Maybe! But it isn't likely that he'd murder him for the sake of those bank notes!" retorted the Chief Constable. "Von Eckhardstein's name is known to me—he's a man who's dealt in millions in his time, and been in at some of the biggest flotations of late years. My opinion is that he walked some distance up that path with Guy Markenmore, left him, returned to the Dower House, and knew nothing of Markenmore's murder until he heard of it later. Markenmore met the actual murderer after he parted with von Eckhardstein, and I should say that the murderer is a man who was thoroughly conversant with Markenmore's movements and doings, knew that he was to take that path to Mitbourne Station, and lay in wait for him at Markenmore Hollow. That's how I work it out."

Blick made no reply to this for a few minutes. The Chief Constable's dogcart had covered another half-mile of road before he spoke.

"There's no doubt that the briar-wood pipe of which we've heard a good deal was von Eckhard-

stein's," he said, at last. "Nor that he left it at the Sceptre, nor that Grimsdale produced it at the inquest, nor that von Eckhardstein picked it up from the solicitor's table as he went out. Now, if he's an absolutely innocent man, why didn't he get up at that inquest, explain his presence at the Sceptre, admit that he did leave his pipe there, and behave candidly and openly, instead of keeping everything back and purloining that pipe as cleverly as any pickpocket? Come!"

"Can't say," answered the Chief Constable. "I should imagine that he'd reasons of his own for keeping silence—especially after he'd heard Grimsdale say that he couldn't identify the third man of the party."

"Well, there's another queer thing," remarked Blick. "Von Eckhardstein must have known that, eventually, this man Lansbury would come forward! He'd known that Lansbury would let the truth out—as he has. We've got at that, anyhow!"

"Have we got at the truth of anything?" asked the Chief Constable a little cynically. "If we're going in for mere theorizing, I can suggest a dozen theories. Here's one to cogitate over, Blick—supposing there's some big financial operation at the bottom of all this, and that the removal of Guy Markenmore was a necessity to those chiefly responsible? I've known of men getting a bullet through their brains simply because they were in the way! And as to truth—well, give me proof! Truth's not so easy to come at in these matters—and I doubt if we shall get any substantial contribution to it here," he added significantly, as they drove up to the Dower House.

“Haven’t the least idea what we shall get!” responded Blick, equally cynical. “But we may find something.”

What they did find was Mrs. Tretheroe in a state of high excitement. She was convinced that her guest, unable to sleep, had gone out for one of his midnight strolls, and had fallen into some old pit or disused quarry. Her own men-servants, several villagers, and the local policeman had been searching for him since breakfast-time, with no result. She scouted the idea that he had taken it into his head to go away, and it was with scorn and indignation that she gave Blick his private and business addresses in London. Blick cared nothing for either indignation or scorn; he went off to the village telegraph office and wired for news; he also sent private messages of his own to headquarters in London in furtherance of his object—one way or another, he meant to have news of von Eckhardstein.

“After all,” he said to the Chief Constable, as they lunched together at the Sceptre, “there’s no getting away from the fact that, according to our information, von Eckhardstein was the last person who saw Guy Markenmore alive!”

“No!” answered the Chief Constable. “You’re wrong, Blick. The last person who saw Guy Markenmore alive was the man who murdered him.”

Blick regarded this as a verbal quibble and changed the subject. Late in the afternoon he got replies to his various telegrams. Nothing had been seen or heard of von Eckhardstein at his usual London haunts. Nor, when night fell again, had any news of him come to hand in Markenmore.

CHAPTER XVI

FAMILY MATTERS

Early in the morning of that day, Mr. Fransem-mery, in common with the rest of the Markenmore people, heard of the strange disappearance of Baron von Eckhardstein, and like many of them, he joined in a search for the missing man. Since his coming to The Warren, Mr. Fransemmery had become minutely acquainted with his immediate surroundings, and he knew of many nooks and corners of the woods and downs wherein a stranger might easily have met with an accident. There were queer places in that neighbourhood; two thousand years ago, the folk who were here before the Romans had quarried the hill-sides, scooped out caves and pit-dwellings, and made long lines of fortifications and trenches. These primeval works, grown over in course of time, were danger-traps for the unwary who wandered through the backwoods or crossed the rough, unfrequented parts of the uplands; more than once, in Mr. Fransemmery's short experience of Markenmore, he had known of man or horse falling into some unexpected cavity. Some such accident as this he conceived to have been possible in the present instance, and when he heard of von Eckhardstein's disappearance, he took his stoutest walking-stick, some lunch in his pocket, and a small flask of brandy and water,

and set out to prospect. In the course of the day he met many folk who were similarly engaged. Mrs. Tretheroe was so much concerned about the fate of her guest, and so convinced that evil had befallen him, that she had pressed into service every villager who could be spared from his proper and usual labours, and had offered a handsome reward for success. But when eventide came again, and Mr. Fransemmery, weary with tramping up hill and down dale, returned to his own fireside, no success had materialized; Baron von Eckhardstein, as far as Markenmore folk were concerned, had vanished.

Mr. Fransemmery sat down to his solitary dinner, puzzled and wondering. He had thought of little else than the Markenmore problem since it was first presented to him, and the more he thought, the more he was bewildered. He had listened with care and patience, and, he hoped, with understanding, to the evidence put before himself and his fellow-jurymen, and he was bound to confess that he had made little out of it. What seemed to him much the most important fact of that evidence was the affair of the briar-wood pipe. There was no doubt that that pipe had been left on the supper-table at the Sceptre by one of the two men who were there with Guy Markenmore. There was no doubt that Grimsdale produced it at the inquest, passed it round, and left it lying on the table; there was no doubt—none whatever—that it was abstracted from that table between the moment of adjoining and the moment wherein the officious newspaper reporter asked to see it. What was to be deduced from that? In Mr. Fransemmery's opinion one certain conclusion—the owner of that pipe, the man who had left it at the Sceptre, was

present at the inquest, *and had kept silence*. Who was he? Mr. Fransemmery had asked himself that question a hundred times, and got no answer. He was unaware of Blick's doings and discoveries, and had only his own knowledge to go on. But he felt sure of one thing—the owner of the pipe had purloined it from the solicitors' table of the temporary court in the old dining-hall so that it could not be used in evidence against him. Once more—who was he?

Mr. Fransemmery was still puzzling about this and various other collateral questions when his bachelor dinner came to its end. He rose from his chair and meditated a little; then, remembering that he had had a very hard and trying day, he went to his modest cellar, found a bottle of his best good old port, and carefully decanting it, carried the decanter and a brightly polished glass or two into his library. With his slippered feet on the padded fender-rail, the decanter of port at his elbow, and a cheery fire of beech-logs in front of him, Mr. Fransemmery proceeded to do more thinking. But he had not followed his train of thought very far when his trim parlour-maid entered to his presence, and informed him that Mr. Harborough was in the hall, and would be obliged if Mr. Fransemmery would see him for a few minutes.

Mr. Fransemmery rose from his deep chair with alacrity. He had never had speech with Harborough before the occasion on which they met at Markenmore Court on the morning of the murder, but he knew all about him as the wealthy owner of Greycloister; he regarded him as a wrongly accused man, and he was sorry that his home-coming should have been marred by so much unpleasantness. Moreover, Mr. Fransem-

mery was the sort of man who is always glad of a chat with anybody—and just now, in spite of the Coroner's admonition to him and his fellow-jurymen, he felt that he had plenty to talk about. He accordingly hastened into the hall with open hand and welcoming smile.

"Hope I am not disturbing you?" said Harborough, as his host led him into the cosy library. "An odd time to call—but I had a reason."

"My dear sir, I am only too delighted!" exclaimed Mr. Fransemmery hospitably. "Try that chair—and a glass of my port. I can recommend both."

"You are very good," responded Harborough. "I'm no great judge of wines," he added, taking the glass which his host handed him with old-fashioned courtesy, "and as to easy-chairs, I haven't had much acquaintance with them of late years—a camp-stool has been more in my line, Mr. Fransemmery! Well," he continued, as Mr. Fransemmery resumed his own seat, "I came to ask your advice about something; I rather formed the opinion, when I met you the other day, that you were the most likely man round here to take a common-sense view of things."

"Flattered, I'm sure!" said Mr. Fransemmery. "I hope I am a common-sense person."

"Well, you know what I mean," observed Harborough. "You're not likely to let local prejudices and gossip affect you. Now, I want to ask your advice—as I said just now. Tomorrow, Sir Anthony and his elder son are to be buried in Markenmore churchyard. I, of course, have known the Markenmore family ever since I knew anything. Guy Markenmore and I were close friends as boys and young men, until the estrangement happened, of which you

heard the other day. Now, do you think it would be proper if I attended the funeral—having regard to present circumstances?"

Mr. Fransemmery fell into a naturally judicial attitude. His face became thoughtful, and, at first, a little doubtful. But suddenly it cleared.

"My dear sir!" he said. "It is, I believe, within my recollection that, when you were giving evidence before myself and my fellow-jurymen the other morning, you said, clearly, plainly distinctly, without any apparent mental reserve that your one-time feeling of anger and resentment against the late Guy Markenmore had completely died out years ago, and that, had you met him again, you would have offered him your hand. Am I right?"

"Quite!" replied Harborough. "On all points."

"Then I see no reason why you should not attend the funeral ceremonies," said Mr. Fransemmery. "None!"

"Well—one's got to remember that there are people—close at hand—who believe I killed Guy Markenmore," said Harborough.

"Um!" remarked Mr. Fransemmery dryly. "But—are there? I mean—seriously?"

"Mrs. Tretheroe—and her following," suggested Harborough.

"Has she any following?" asked Mr. Fransemmery, more dryly. "And as for herself—temper, my dear sir, temper! I don't believe the woman thinks anything of the sort, if you could really get at her mind—if she has one."

"I think she did—at first," said Harborough, after a moment's reflection. "Natural, perhaps."

“Natural, perhaps, if one is foolish enough to believe that people cherish resentment indefinitely,” said Mr. Fransemmery. “She must know that her accusation was ridiculous! I do not think I should attach the slightest importance to Mrs. Tretheroe’s opinion. But,” he added, as if struck by a sudden happy thought, “I know what I should do!—I should just ask the two young people at Markenmore Court what their wishes are. My opinion is that they would be glad of your presence.”

“Hadn’t thought of that,” said Harborough. “Bit slow, I think. I’m sorry enough for them, God knows! And I think they know that whatever I once felt about their brother I—well, I got over it long since.”

Mr. Fransemmery gave his visitor a keen, sidelong glance. “I suppose Guy Markenmore really did treat you badly?” he suggested.

“Yes!” answered Harborough, with simple directness. “But—I’ve forgotten it. And—not all his fault, either. As I say—I’ve forgotten it.”

“Queer business, this murder!” remarked Mr. Fransemmery. “And now here’s a second mystery. You’ve heard, of course, about this Baron von Eckhardstein?”

“No,” replied Harborough. “I’ve heard nothing. I’ve been away from Greycloister since very early this morning until just now—came straight to see you as soon as I got back. What about von Eckhardstein?”

“Disappeared!” exclaimed Mr. Fransemmery. “Last night. Clean gone!—no one knows where.” He proceeded to give his guest a circumstantial

account of the day's doings, and of his own share in them. "What do you think of that?" he asked in conclusion. "Odd, isn't it?"

"The whole affair's odd," asserted Harborough. "It looks to me as if—but, really, I think that's impossible!"

"What's impossible?" demanded Mr. Fransem-mery.

"Well, I was thinking—I was going to say—it almost looks as though this might be a second murder!" answered Harborough diffidently. "I've been wondering—but, as I said, I'm a bit slow at the thinking game, sometimes—if von Eckhardstein wasn't the man who turned up at the Sceptre at two o'clock in the morning? In that case——"

Mr. Fransem-mery started.

"Ah!" he said. "When you came in, I was just getting to some such conclusion myself! If he was that man, then that accounts for something else. But—supposing he was—you were going to say."

"I was going to say that in that case, it looks as if he and Guy Markenmore had been mixed up in business matters," replied Harborough. "And if so, business matters—some big money deal—may be at the bottom of this. For instance, somebody may have wanted to get rid of both of 'em? Heard of cases of that sort myself—not in this country, though."

"It may be, it may be!" assented Mr. Fransem-mery. "The whole thing is a mystery which seems difficult of solution, and——"

What more Mr. Fransem-mery was going to say was never said. At that moment the door opened, the trim parlour-maid murmured something indistinctly,

stepped aside, vanished, and gave place to Valencia Markenmore, who came into the room so rapidly that she failed to see Harborough, whose tall figure was hidden from her by a screen.

"Oh, Mr. Fransemmery!" she exclaimed, as she entered. "Do forgive me for rushing in on you so unceremoniously, but I'm in an awful lot of trouble, and I want your help, and—oh!"

She had rounded the screen by that time, and had caught sight of Harborough. Harborough got to his feet, looking uncertain and awkward.

"I'll go!" he said.

"No, indeed!" protested Valencia. "Not a bit of it—I'd—I'd just as soon tell you as Mr. Fransemmery—I'll tell you both. You're men—you'll know what to do."

Mr. Fransemmery signed to Harborough to stay where he was and drew a chair forward to the hearth.

"What is it, my dear?" he enquired, as Valencia seated herself. "Anything that we can do, I am quite sure will be done—if it's within our power."

"I don't know that it's in anybody's power to do," answered Valencia. "Nothing, I should think! The thing's done, and can't be undone!"

"And what is done?" asked Mr. Fransemmery softly.

Valencia looked from one man to the other. Each was watching her attentively; each saw that she was somewhat excited and vexed, and probably angry.

"I may as well blurt it straight out!" she said suddenly. "My brother Harry is married to Poppy Wrenne!"

Again she glanced at the two men—this time enquiringly. Harborough became Sphinx-like in

expression; Mr. Fransemmery took off his spectacles and began to polish them.

"Um!" he said, in still softer accents. "A secret marriage?"

"Of course!" exclaimed Valencia. "Three months ago—in London."

"And known, until now, to nobody?" enquired Mr. Fransemmery.

"Yes, it was known!" said Valencia. "It was known to Mrs. Braxfield!"

"The bride's mother!" remarked Mr. Fransemmery slowly. "Dear me! Really! And so—Poppy Wrenne is really Lady Markenmore?"

"Of course!" snapped Valencia.

"There's no doubt about the marriage?—its legality, I mean?" asked Mr. Fransemmery.

"None!" declared Valencia, as curtly as before, "whatever!"

Mr. Fransemmery remained silent a moment. Then he looked past Valencia, towards Harborough. Harborough, rubbing his chin, stared at the fire. Mr. Fransemmery turned to Valencia.

"And what is the trouble?" he enquired. "As you say, my dear, since the thing is done—why, it is done!"

"The trouble's this, Mr. Fransemmery," replied Valencia. "Harry came and told me this an hour ago. He said that he and Poppy Wrenne had been in love with each other ever since she left that boarding-school that her mother sent her to, and lately Mrs. Braxfield had been in the secret, and she had consented, not only to their engagement, but to their marriage in London, when Poppy was staying there three months since. It was when Harry went up to

town for a holiday—he was away quite a month. Well, now—now that things are as they are—you both know what I mean—Mrs. Braxfield insists that the time has come for this to be made public; she insists that her daughter shall take her rightful place at—at the funeral tomorrow, as Lady Markenmore, and she has threatened Harry that unless this is done, she will—well, I suppose she'll make a scene!"

"And—your brother?" asked Mr. Fransemmery. "What does he say?"

"He would rather have postponed it until the funeral is over," replied Valencia. "Then he was going to announce it, in due form. But Mrs. Braxfield is adamant—he's seen her twice today, and she won't budge an inch! She insists that Lady Markenmore should be in her rightful place tomorrow—to be seen and known as Lady Markenmore by everybody."

Mr. Fransemmery caught his other guest's eye.

"What do you say, Harborough?" he asked.

Harborough, conscious of Valencia's sudden gaze in his direction, flushed under his brown skin.

"I—er—oh, well, I—don't think I'm much of a hand at advising in these matters," he said shyly.

"I—er—don't know much about 'em, don't you know. But—er—it seems to me that it might be—I might ask, eh?—What does the young lady—Lady Markenmore—say about it?"

"Good!" muttered Mr. Fransemmery. "Excellent! Now, my dear, what *does* Lady Markenmore say about it?"

"Lady Markenmore, who isn't at home, but who's arriving there late tonight, writes that she would

infinitely prefer to do precisely what her husband prefers and proposes to do," replied Valencia. "She agrees entirely with Harry—but as far as I can gather, Mrs. Braxfield is the sort of person who will either have her own way or make things very disagreeable if she doesn't get it! That's the situation—and don't you think, Mr. Fransemmery, that as you know all of us, you might see Mrs. Braxfield, tonight, and persuade her to listen to reason? I don't want any scenes tomorrow."

"I will go!" said Mr. Fransemmery. "I will talk to Mrs. Braxfield. But—do I understand that your brother's intention——"

"Harry's intention is to announce his marriage as soon as the funeral is over," said Valencia. "I am not going to the church—there will only be men there. When they come back to the house, there will be some legal formalities—my father's will, and so on. Mr. Chilford will be there, and others, kinsfolk, you know. He will make the announcement then."

"I will go and see Mrs. Braxfield at once," said Mr. Fransemmery. "Whether I have sufficient influence with the good lady to move her to accede to your proposition, my dear, I do not know, but I will do my utmost. But you," he continued, as all three went out into the hall, where he took down his overcoat and cap, "you, my dear, cannot go back across the park alone! Harborough?"

"All right, sir," said Harborough quietly. "I'm going with her."

"Thank you—both," murmured Valencia. "Not that I'm afraid of crossing the park by myself, though."

Mr. Fransemmery opened his front door, went along a path in his garden, and whistled.

The two people behind him heard a rustle; then the rattling of a chain.

"My dog!" said Mr. Fransemmery. "I never go out at night without him. Down, Tinker!—I call him Tinker," he continued, "because I bought him, as a pup, from a disreputable fellow who came round here mending pots and pans."

"What is he?" asked Valencia. "A mongrel? of sorts?"

"No," replied Mr. Fransemmery. "He's a pure-bred Airedale—the finest breed in the world for—shall we say?—police purposes. That's what I bought him for. This is a lonely situation—and we have queer folk round here sometimes."

At the gate of Mr. Fransemmery's garden the three separated; the two younger people went away across the hill-side and the park in the direction of Markenmore Court; Mr. Fransemmery took the nearest route to Woodland Cottage, his dog running a little in front of him. The dusk had come long since; the skies were dark; Mr. Fransemmery, who had gained much knowledge of weather since taking up his residence in the country, fancied that there would be rain before morning. And it was dark on the surface of the land, and in Deep Lane, into which he presently descended, it was black as a winter midnight. Down there, in the few yards which he had to traverse before climbing the opposite bank, Mr. Fransemmery's Airedale terrier left him; presently he heard him whimper amongst the thick bushes.

"Rabbits!" said Mr. Fransemmery. "Come away for this time, Tinker!"

The terrier came back, still whining, and obviously restless and unwilling. He behaved as if he wished to return to the spot he had just left, but his master called him to heel, and went forward. Just then Mr. Fransemmery's thoughts were not of rabbit-warrens and eager dogs—they were of the unexpected revelation which Valencia Markenmore had made to him, and of his coming interview with that capable and masterful woman, Mrs. Braxfield.

CHAPTER XVII

TOO LATE

Mrs. Braxfield herself opened the door of Woodland Cottage to Mr. Fransemmery, and making out his identity by the light of the lamp in her hall, bade him enter in tones of warm welcome.

“Never rains but it pours!” she exclaimed, as she ushered the visitor towards her parlour. “I’ve got one caller already, and now here’s another; glad to see you, Mr. Fransemmery!”

Mr. Fransemmery stepped into a well-lighted, cosy sitting-room, and found himself staring at Blick. Blick smiled and nodded; he recognized the newcomer as the bland and spectacled gentleman who had acted as foreman of the jury at the recent inquest. Mr. Fransemmery, of course, knew who Blick was. He hesitated on the threshold.

“If you’re talking business matters—” he suggested.

“Not at all!” exclaimed Mrs. Braxfield. “This young gentleman—too young, I tell him, to have such a job as he has!—simply came to ask me what he calls a pertinent question about my evidence the other morning. I’m a very good-tempered woman, as you well know, Mr. Fransemmery, or I might have given his question another name, and called it impertinent! What do you think he wanted to know, Mr. Fran-

208 THE MARKENMORE MYSTERY

semmary? If I was certain that the man I saw on the hill-side the morning of the murder was Mr. John Harborough? The idea!"

Blick, who looked very much at home in an easy chair, gave Mrs. Braxfield a whimsical glance.

"Well, you haven't told me yet if you were certain!" he said.

Mrs. Braxfield bridled.

"I'm not so old that I've lost the use of my eyes, my lad!" she exclaimed. "I can see as well as you can!—better, for anything I know."

"It was very early in the morning," remarked Blick. "The light was uncertain—I've learned that there was a good deal of mist about on the hill-sides—Hobbs, the man who found Guy Markenmore's body, says that about here it was very misty indeed that Tuesday morning——"

"How does he know?" demanded Mrs. Braxfield sharply. "Was he about here at that time—four o'clock?"

"He was about here an hour and a half later, and if it was misty at five-thirty it would be still more so at four-fifteen," retorted Blick. "Now, if it was—as it was!—misty you might easily mistake one person for another, Mrs. Braxfield. And, at that time you referred to in your evidence, there was a man, closely resembling Mr. Harborough in height, build, and general appearance—I don't refer to facial resemblance—who was somewhere in this immediate neighbourhood."

"What man?" asked Mrs. Braxfield suspiciously.

"Baron von Eckhardstein," said Blick. "That's a fact!"

Mrs. Braxfield turned to Mr. Fransemmery, who had been standing during the exchange of words, and

pointed him to an easy chair, opposite that in which Blick sat. She took another, between the two men.

"Oh!" she said. "So he was up here, was he? That foreign man, staying at Mrs. Tretheroe's? Oh! Indeed! Well, I never saw him!—the man I saw was Mr. Harborough. To be sure, now to think of it, that foreigner is about Mr. Harborough's height and figure."

"Now that you think of it again, don't you think that you may have been mistaken?" suggested Blick. "Don't you think that the man you saw may have been von Eckhardstein, and not Harborough? Come, now!"

"No!" said Mrs. Braxfield. "You won't come it over me, young man! I've been in a law-court before today, and you're suggesting answers to your witness. The man I saw, and that I spoke about in that witness-box was John Harborough! Do you think that I shouldn't know a man who's been well known to me ever since he was that high? Ridiculous!"

"You hadn't seen Harborough for seven years," said Blick.

"What's seven years out of thirty-five?" retorted Mrs. Braxfield, with scorn. "I remember John Harborough being born, there at Greycloister. I tell you it was him that I saw on Tuesday morning—of course it was! It is ridiculous, isn't it, Mr. Fransemmer?"

Mr. Fransemmer, utterly puzzled to know what all this was about, glanced at the detective.

"I—er—thought that Mr. Harborough fully admitted that he was up this way on Tuesday morning about four o'clock?" he observed.

"Mr. Harborough did; Mr. Harborough was up here," agreed Blick. "There's no question of that. But, so was another man—von Eckhardstein. It's

all—for me—a question of exact times and places. I thought that Mrs. Braxfield might have been mistaken, but as she was not, I can only congratulate her on her excellent eyesight! Oh, by the way, Mrs. Braxfield,” he added, with a smile. “There’s another matter—a pleasanter one—on which I must congratulate you! I heard in the village, just before I came up, of the event which you had announced. I wish your daughter every happiness in her new station; from what I’m told she’ll fill it admirably.”

“Why, thank you, I think she will, and I’m much obliged to you,” responded Mrs. Braxfield. “But that’ll be so much Greek to Mr. Fransemmery—you don’t know what he’s talking about, Mr. Fransemmery, do you?”

“I—I think I do, Mrs. Braxfield,” replied Mr. Fransemmery. “I—the fact is, just before coming out, I had a visit from Miss Markenmore. She told me that her brother, now Sir Henry Markenmore, was married to your daughter, and that he intends to make public announcement of the fact to his kinsfolk and his solicitor tomorrow, after the sad ceremony of which we are all aware is over. But—er—I understood that no other announcement had yet been made?”

“Did you?” exclaimed Mrs. Braxfield, a little contemptuously. “No doubt you would—from Valencia Markenmore! But they have me to reckon with, Mr. Fransemmery, and I intend that my daughter, Lady Markenmore, shall occupy her rightful position tomorrow! She’ll get home here tonight from London, where she’s been staying with friends—I expect her from Selcaster station about eleven o’clock. She’s coming by the last train, and tomorrow morning she’ll assume her proper place at

Markenmore Court. As to whether she attends the funeral ceremonies of Sir Anthony and Mr. Guy she and her husband, Sir Harry, can decide; I'm nothing to do with that, Mr. Fransemmery. What I have to do with is making sure that my daughter, now that she is Lady Markenmore, is in her proper position as mistress of Markenmore Court when its late master is carried out for burial!"

Mr. Fransemmery made no immediate reply. He was conscious now that the ground had been cut from under his feet; there was no chance of fulfilling his promise to Valencia. Evidently, the new Lady Markenmore's mother had assumed responsibility, mounted her high horse, and had her own way.

"I sincerely hope the young people will be happy," he said lamely. "I—er—trust so!"

"Be their own fault if they aren't!" declared Mrs. Braxfield sharply. "What's to prevent it? I shan't! I've been uncommonly good to them—especially to him; far more so than most mothers would have been in similar circumstances, I assure you, Mr. Fransemmery. You don't know everything!"

"I know next to nothing, ma'am," protested Mr. Fransemmery. "I am just acquainted with the bare fact of the marriage."

"Well, I'll tell you," said Mrs. Braxfield. "I don't mind your knowing, and I don't mind this young man knowing, stranger though he is——"

"I've been trying to say good-bye for the last ten minutes," said Blick good-humouredly. "But you were so engrossed with your family affairs that you didn't notice I'd risen, Mrs. Braxfield. I wasn't lingering to listen—out of curiosity."

"Never said you were!" retorted Mrs. Braxfield. "Sit down again—as you're concerned in Guy Markenmore's affairs, you're concerned in his brother's, my son-in-law. I said I didn't mind your knowing the facts of this marriage—I don't mind anybody knowing; it's not my fault that it hasn't been open. It was like this, Mr. Fransemmery. You know that my daughter is a very pretty, very graceful, highly accomplished girl. She gets her good looks from my family—all our women have been distinguished for their good looks, though I say it myself."

"You may safely and justly say it for yourself, ma'am!" murmured Mr. Fransemmery. "As I have frequently observed."

"I join in Mr. Fransemmery's sentiments, Mrs. Braxfield," added Blick with a bow. "Precisely what I was thinking!"

"Well, I've worn very well," said Mrs. Braxfield complacently. "We all do—and as I say, my daughter has inherited the family good looks. And as for her accomplishments—well, if she isn't a well-educated young woman, it's her own fault. She went to the Girl's High School at Selester from being ten until she was fifteen; then she'd two years at the very best boarding-school I could hear of in London, and she finished off with twelve months in Paris. Cost me no end of money, I can tell you, her education did! And having brought her up like that, well, I sold my business at the Sceptre and retired here, so that the girl would have proper surroundings. And it was not so long after coming here, Mr. Fransemmery, that I found out that she and young Harry Markenmore were sweet on each other, and meeting in these woods and so on. I wasn't going to have that going on un-

less I knew what it all meant, and what it was going to lead to, so I had it out with him. Then he got me to consent to an engagement, though he persuaded me to let him keep that secret from his father and sister for a while. And in the end he got round me about this marriage—he promised that if I'd only consent to that, he'd tell Sir Anthony of it very soon afterwards. So I gave way, and I saw them married, in a London church, and just afterwards Sir Anthony fell ill, and Harry made that an excuse for putting things off, and though there were times—plenty of them, Mr. Fransemmery!—when he could have told his father—and of course, he could have told his sister at any time—he was always making excuses. So when Sir Anthony died the other day, and this affair of Guy's happened, and Harry came into the title and estates, I made up my mind that I'd have the thing seen to and put right at once, and I told him so. I've seen him twice today, and he's just like every Markenmore that ever I knew—obstinate and self-willed! He wanted to put it off again—until his father and brother were buried. I said No!—my daughter was going to take her proper position as mistress of Markenmore Court tomorrow morning. And so she will!”

“I think, ma'am,” observed Mr. Fransemmery quietly, “you said just now that you had announced this marriage?”

“I have!” answered Mrs. Braxfield.

“To whom, may I ask?” enquired the elder visitor. “Mr. Blick, I think, has heard it from somebody in the village?”

“I announced it to the proper people,” replied Mrs. Braxfield with spirit. “I'm not the sort of person to

do otherwise. I announced it to the Vicar; to Mr. Chilford, the Markenmore's family solicitor; and to Mrs. Perrin, the wife of the principal tenant-farmer."

"With leave, I suppose, to tell the news to any one?" suggested Mr. Fransemmery.

"Of course! Why not, Mr. Fransemmery?" exclaimed Mrs. Braxfield. "My daughter is Lady Markenmore!"

Mr. Fransemmery coughed—a short, dry, embarrassed cough—and Mrs. Braxfield looked at him, suddenly and sharply. She had detected, or fancied she had detected, some meaning in that cough.

"What now?" she asked, a note of impatience in her voice. "What's that mean, Mr. Fransemmery? I know you're a lawyer, though you don't practise it—are you implying that my daughter isn't Lady Markenmore?"

"If her husband is Sir Harry Markenmore, ma'am, your daughter is certainly Lady Markenmore," replied Mr. Fransemmery calmly. "But—is he?"

Mrs. Braxfield's rosy cheeks turned pale. Blick, who was watching her closely, saw a sudden compression of her lips; he saw, too, an involuntary, mechanical lifting of her hand, upward. But the colour came back as she turned on Mr. Fransemmery.

"Whatever do you mean?" she demanded with an awkward attempt at an incredulous laugh. "Sir Harry! Of course, he's Sir Harry! His father's dead—his brother's dead——"

"Supposing his brother left a son?" said Mr. Fransemmery, in quiet, level tones. "What then?"

Mrs. Braxfield turned paler than before. And now Blick, keenly alive to the new situation and possibilities, saw that she was really alarmed. She stared silently at Mr. Fransemmery—stared and stared, and

still remained silent. And Blick spoke, looking at the elder man.

“You wouldn’t say that unless you’d some grounds for saying it,” he observed. “Have you? Because, if so, I’d like to know. It’s my duty to get all the information I can about Guy Markenmore.”

“Mr. Blick,” answered Mr. Fransemmery in his gravest accents, “your profession being what it is, I can speak freely to you. And I will speak freely to Mrs. Braxfield, things having developed as they have. What I am going to say has only been known to me for a few hours; I think it may be known to the Markenmores’ solicitor by now—it may be—and possibly to Harry Markenmore. But I’ll tell you and Mrs. Braxfield what it is, now—it may save some trouble. Mind, this is nothing that I can personally vouch for!—it is only something that I have heard. And it is this—I may tell you that I have spent the whole day searching for Baron von Eckhardstein; I have been all up and down in the lonelier parts of the woods and in some of the Down valleys. About noon I was in that very out-of-the-way valley on the other side of one hill, called Grayling Bottom—a wild, solitary place, Mr. Blick. There is just one human habitation in it, tenanted by a woman whom Mrs. Braxfield no doubt knows—Margaret Hilson. It was very chilly in that valley—a sunless, cold place always—and I asked Margaret Hilson to let me sit by her cottage fire while I ate my lunch, which I had carried out with me. This woman is a close, reserved person—the sort, I should say, who could keep secrets for ever if she chose—but she talked to me with some freedom about the present events and situation. And finding that I was a lawyer, she talked still more freely, and in the end—knowing, as she said, that

things would have to come out—she said she would tell me something that she had kept entirely to herself for four years. Briefly, it was this: Margaret Hilson says that at just about the time of Guy Markenmore's disappearance from these parts, there also disappeared a girl named Myra Halliwell, a very pretty girl, one of two daughters of a small farmer in this neighbourhood, whose sister, Daphne Halliwell, she said, went out to India as lady's-maid to Mrs. Tretheroe, came back with her, and is now in her service at the Dower House. This Myra, says Margaret Hilson, was considered to be engaged to be married to a man named Roper—James Roper—a woodman, still, I believe, employed on the Markenmore estate. But, as I have said, she, according to Margaret Hilson, completely disappeared at the same time that Guy Markenmore left the Court. That," observed Mr. Fransemmerly, pausing in his narration and glancing significantly at the detective, "is an important matter to keep in mind—in view of what follows."

Blick nodded. But he was not watching Mr. Fransemmerly so much as he was watching Mrs. Braxfield. Obviously she was more than deeply interested in the story which was being so unexpectedly revealed to her, and since the introduction of Myra Halliwell's name her interest had deepened almost to the point of agitation. Her colour came and went; her lips were alternately compressed and relaxed; clearly, thought Blick, this woman was distinctly anxious, not to say alarmed. And when Mr. Fransemmerly paused, she kept her eyes on him with an expression which showed that she was waiting, with almost frightened eagerness, to know what was coming next.

"Well," continued Mr. Fransemmerly, "what fol-

lows is this: Margaret Hilson, some four years after the disappearance of Myra Halliwell from these parts, went to London to visit a sister of hers who lived near Wandsworth Common. Margaret usually went out on the Common of a morning, to take the air, while her sister, a working-man's wife, was engaged on her household tasks. One morning, as she was strolling about, she saw a young, smartly dressed woman whose appearance seemed familiar to her, and who had with her a nursemaid in charge of a perambulator in which was a child. They came near, and in the smart young woman Margaret Hilson recognized Myra Halliwell. The recognition was mutual; they stopped and spoke to each other. And the result was that Myra Halliwell, pledging Margaret to secrecy, confided to her that she was married to Mr. Guy Markenmore, and that the child in the perambulator, now three years old, was their son——"

Mrs. Braxfield suddenly smote the table with her clenched fist.

"A lie!" she exclaimed hoarsely. "A lie—all through! Why!—he asked Mrs. Tretheroe to marry him, the night he was here! You both heard her swear it—in the witness-box; you know you did!"

Blick said nothing. He was watching Mr. Fransemmery now—convinced that there was more in and behind this story than he had at first imagined. Its various phases were opening up new ideas, new visions to him; he was becoming professionally excited over it.

"I have not yet finished, Mrs. Braxfield," said Mr. Fransemmery quietly. "Allow me—now, Margaret Hilson, who, in my opinion, is just the woman to keep close thoughts—promised young Mrs. Guy that she would keep the secret, and she did. But, a year ago,

Margaret Hilson went to visit her sister again—at the same place. Again, she took her walks on Wandsworth Common. And, one morning, she met, not Mrs. Guy Markenmore, but the same nurse, with the same child, then grown into a sturdy boy of five. She spoke to the nurse, who told her that the mother was dead—had died a year previously, of pneumonia; the child, she said, was being brought up by a lady to whose care he had been entrusted on his mother's death, and she, the nurse, remained with him. The nurse, who probably saw no reason why she should not talk freely to a woman with whom she had seen her late mistress in close and intimate conversation, added some details. She said that the child's father came to see him twice a week, and always spent Sunday afternoon with him; she, the nurse, spoke of him as a handsome and well-to-do man. She further said that the child was called after him—Guy. Finally, she told Margaret Hilson where her late mistress was buried, and Margaret Hilson went to see the grave. She found it easily enough from the particulars given her, and she saw the inscription on the tombstone—Myra, wife of Guy Markenmore. That, too, Margaret Hilson has kept to herself—but, Mrs. Braxfield, she was not going to keep it to herself longer than tonight! Her intention, when I called at her cottage, was to tell Mr. Chilford all that she knew, this evening; as I did call, she told me. I advised her to tell Chilford at once—by now, she may have done so—I suppose she has. I don't think there's the slightest ground for doubting the truth of her story—why should there be? And it is, of course, absolutely certain that if the late Guy Markenmore's little boy is alive—why, he's the heir to the title and the estates!"

CHAPTER XVIII

DEEP LANE

Mr. Fransemmery brought his story to an end with a force and emphasis worthy of a judicial utterance, and Blick, who was now busily occupied with suggestions of a surprising sort, nodded assent to his concluding remarks. But Mrs. Braxfield, in spite of her obvious agitation, showed a dogged disinclination to accept Mr. Fransemmery's premise.

"That's all very well, Mr. Fransemmery," she said after a pause. "You're a lawyer, and ought to know! But it's all ifs and buts! If, as you say, Guy Markenmore married Myra Halliwell, and if they had a child, a son, and if that son's alive—well, then, of course, he succeeds his father—or his grandfather, for as far as I'm aware, there's nobody knows which died first, Sir Anthony or his elder son—in the title and estates. But—it's all if!—if—if—if! I don't believe Guy Markenmore ever married that girl—not I! He may have taken her away with him, and they may have lived together in London, and there may be a child—but all that doesn't prove any marriage, Mr. Fransemmery!"

"What about the inscription on the tombstone, Mrs. Braxfield?" suggested Mr. Fransemmery. "My informant saw it!—and I take Margaret Hilson to be a truthful woman."

"I'm not saying anything against Margaret Hil-

son," retorted Mrs. Braxfield. "A decent enough woman! And I don't deny that she may have seen such an inscription. But that proves nothing. Anybody could so describe anybody else—especially in a London cemetery, and who'd be the wiser! There'll have to be more evidence than that forthcoming, Mr. Fransemmery, before it's proved that all you've told is true—marriage lines, and birth certificate, and so on."

"All that will doubtless be brought forward, ma'am," replied Mr. Fransemmery. "We shall hear more, I'm convinced—much more! Somebody must know."

"And you say you advised Margaret Hilson to go and tell this tale to Lawyer Chilford?" asked Mrs. Braxfield. "At once?"

"At once!" answered Mr. Fransemmery. "Matters of that sort can't be allowed to wait. I think Margaret Hilson will already have seen Mr. Chilford—she spoke of going down to his house early this evening."

"Then they'll know at the Court," observed Mrs. Braxfield with a frown. "Chilford would be sure to go there and tell them as soon as he got to know."

"They may know—by now," asserted Mr. Fransemmery. "But whether they know tonight or tomorrow, Mrs. Braxfield, what is certain is that this matter will have to be fully investigated. And if I may give you a little advice, ma'am, in the capacity of a neighbour who wishes you well, I should counsel you to wait a little before you send your daughter to Markenmore Court as Lady Markenmore. She may, you know, be only Mrs. Harry Markenmore. Count twenty, ma'am!"

With this Mr. Fransemmery, nodding at Mrs. Braxfield with the warning expression of a sage counsellor, rose to take his leave; his Airedale terrier, hitherto sleeping with one eye open under the table, rose too; accompanied by Blick they sallied out into the night; dark, save for the light of stars, for the moon had not yet risen. In silence they threaded the garden paths of Woodland Cottage and emerged upon the open hill-side.

“Queer revelations!” muttered Blick at last as they paced slowly across the close-cropped turf. “I gather that you believe this story about Guy Markenmore’s marriage?”

“I do!” replied Mr. Fransemmery firmly. “Putting everything together—I do! The woman from whom I got my information today, Margaret Hilson, is the sort of person that makes an ideal witness—you know what I mean. The sort that tells just what she knows, doesn’t want to add or subtract, embellish or disfigure, gives a plain affirmation or an equally plain negative; the sort, in fact, that hasn’t the imagination necessary to a deviation from truth. I have no doubt whatever that she gave me a plain, unvarnished account of what happened during her two visits to London, nor any that she saw the grave and the inscription she describes. And as to the probabilities of the marriage—well, Mr. Blick, I am, perhaps, a bit of an old gossip!—anyway, I like to talk to the country people about their affairs, though I hope I am not a Paul Pry. I like to hear of their little comedies and tragedies—I take a sympathetic interest in them. Now, long before I heard this story from Mrs. Hilson, I had heard of Myra Halliwell and her disappearance, and I had had a hint

from one or two old people in the village that it might not be unconnected with Guy Markenmore. So—I was not unduly surprised at what Mrs. Hilson told me.”

“I wonder if Myra’s sister—the woman at the Dower House—knows anything about it?” said Blick.

“Daffy, as they call her—I wonder, too,” answered Mr. Fransemmery. “I think not, though. Daffy—whose correct name is Daphne—has been away in India for three years with Mrs. Tretheroe, and has only recently returned. Of course she may. But if she does, you may be certain she’ll soon let it be known!”

“She looks,” remarked Blick thoughtfully, “like a woman who’s got a good many secrets. Secretive!—very much so. Well, it’s an odd business, sir! And as you unfolded your story to Mrs. Braxfield I began to speculate on its possible relation to my particular business—naturally!”

“In what way, now?” asked Mr. Fransemmery.

“Well, first of all,” replied Blick. “An obvious question: Has this anything to do with Guy Markenmore’s murder?”

“Ah!” exclaimed Mr. Fransemmery. “Has it, indeed. A very big question, my good sir, and a remarkably difficult one to answer.”

“Another,” continued Blick. “Mrs. Tretheroe told us at the inquest that she and Guy Markenmore had renewed their old love-affairs when they met last Monday night, and had agreed to get married at once. Now, I’d like to know this: Did Guy Markenmore tell her that he’d been married before, lost his wife, and had a son living?”

“Did he, indeed?” said Mr. Fransemmery. “I wonder? But—who knows?”

"If he did," Blick went on, "why didn't she divulge that fact at the inquest? If she knew it, why did she conceal it?"

"Aye—why?" muttered Mr. Fransemmery. "Why?"

"And if Guy Markenmore didn't tell her—the woman he was going to marry!—why didn't he?" said Blick. "Did he or didn't he? It strikes me, sir, that there's a good deal that's of high importance in that!"

"I shouldn't wonder," agreed Mr. Fransemmery. "But then, between you and me, there's a good deal else that I've wondered about ever since I heard Mrs. Tretheroe's evidence!"

"What, for instance?" asked Blick.

"Nothing, in any particular instance," replied Mr. Fransemmery. "I have wondered, generally, if Mrs. Tretheroe told all she might have told; if she was candid, open, ingenuous, truthful. Between ourselves, I think she's a vain, selfish, silly woman—and as stupid as such a woman always is!"

"Stupidity of that sort is very often allied with a good deal of cunning, isn't it, though?" suggested Blick. "She's struck me—what bit I've seen of her—as the sort of woman who could play a game."

"I shouldn't wonder!" agreed Mr. Fransemmery.

"Then, the question for me is—is she playing any game now, and if so, what is it?" said Blick. "And has von Eckhardstein anything to do with it?"

"Ah!" exclaimed Mr. Fransemmery. "That's still another question!"

"Nice mystery altogether!" muttered Blick.

"Black as this lane, my friend," said Mr. Fran-

semmery, as they descended into the deep and narrow cutting which, high-banked and tortuous, wound its way upward to the summit of the downs between The Warren and Woodland Cottage. "And you'll want something more than starlight by which to find your way in it! Up to now, I believe, you've scarcely got hold of the ghost of a clue?"

"Got no more than a very slender thread, which mayn't be a thread at all," answered Blick, thinking of the information that Lansbury had given him. "No!—so far, Mr. Fransemmery, I've very little, indeed, to work on. I—what's your dog up to?"

The Airedale terrier, who had preceded the two men into the darkness of the lane, had run on before them to the spot whereat he had shown inordinate signs of restlessness and curiosity when Mr. Fransemmery was on his way to Mrs. Braxfield. He was now whimpering again, and as they came near the bushes, they heard him tearing and scratching at the soil; the whimpering presently changed to growling.

"Now I shouldn't wonder if that is a badger!" remarked Mr. Fransemmery. "I have had an idea that there were badgers, or a badger, in this lane, and hereabouts, for some time; I fancied that I detected footprints in the loose, sandy soil. If only I had a lantern, I could soon tell, for a badger's burrow is easily distinguishable from a fox's hole."

Blick put a hand in his coat pocket and produced something which, under pressure of his fingers, gave a sharp metallic click, followed by a steady glare of light.

"There you are!" he said. "Electric torches are better than lanterns. Where is he?"

Mr. Fransemmery forced aside the bushes behind which the Airedale was busy, and revealed him at

work, digging furiously at a cavity in the bank. The terrier turned his head, blinked at the light, and went on with his task more eagerly. Mr. Fransemmery sniffed.

“Pho!” he exclaimed. “A badger, certainly! No mistaking the rank odour—quite different to that of a fox. But he won’t be there now, my boy! Badgers go abroad soon after it’s dark, on the search for roots, and insects, and frogs, and the larvae of wasps and bees. Come away, Tinker!”

But the Airedale went on digging, and Blick watched him with interest, keeping the glare of his electric torch on the mouth of the burrow.

“Good hand at excavation!” he said. “He’s thrown some stuff out already. He’d soon be deep into the bank at that rate if—hello!”

He suddenly stooped forward, pushed the dog aside and from the gravelly soil and loose sand that he had thrown up dragged forth an object which shone bright in the glare of the torch. With a sharp exclamation he held it up to Mr. Fransemmery.

“Look at that!” said Blick.

Mr. Fransemmery looked—and recoiled.

“Good Heavens!” he exclaimed. “A revolver?”

Blick straightened himself, and holding his find in his left hand, turned the full light of the electric torch on it.

“A Webley-Fosbery automatic pistol,” he said. “And—new! And thrown in there not so long ago! Mr. Fransemmery!—what if we’ve found the thing that caused Guy Markenmore’s death? I shouldn’t wonder!”

Mr. Fransemmery backed away into the lane.

226 THE MARKENMORE MYSTERY

"Is—is that loaded?" he asked nervously. "I beg you to be careful, my dear sir! I have the greatest horror——"

"You hold the torch," interrupted Blick. "I'll be careful: I know all about firearms." He handed the electric torch to his companion, and with both hands free began to examine the mechanism of the automatic pistol. "Nothing in it," he announced presently. "Not a single cartridge! But look you here, sir—this has not been in there long! Not a speck of rust—all bright, clean, fresh——"

"The sand is very dry," said Mr. Fransemmery, glancing at the mouth of the burrow. "And the gravel, too. Perhaps——"

"No!" said Blick. "If that had been there long, there'd have been at any rate some show of rust, at least a speck or two on the metal. Talk about luck! I feel inclined to give your dog a silver collar!"

"You attach great importance to this?" suggested Mr. Fransemmery.

"The greatest!" exclaimed Blick. "I should just think so! Why!—we're within half a mile of the place where Guy Markenmore was shot dead with a pistol of some sort, and here is a pistol, an automatic pistol, which has obviously been thrown—quite recently—into a hole in the bank, behind bushes, in a lonely lane! Important? My dear sir!—it's a clue!"

"We are close to my house," observed Mr. Fransemmery. "Let us go there and consider the matter more fully. Bless me!—what a very remarkable discovery! It does, indeed, need deep and precise attention."

"It'll get it!" said Blick grimly. "First material clue I've struck."

Mr. Fransemmery led the way to his house. At his door they were met by the trim parlourmaid.

"Mr. Chilford is waiting for you in the library, sir," she said. "I told him I didn't know how long you'd be out, but he said he must wait."

Blick pulled Mr. Fransemmery's sleeve as they entered the hall.

"Not a word about the automatic pistol!" he whispered. "Don't want that to get out at all, yet. Look here—Chilford mightn't want my presence; shall I go?"

"No; come in," said Mr. Fransemmery. "I want you to come in. I'll tell him that you know all about this Hilson business. Ah, Chilford!" he went on, as they entered the library, where the solicitor, evidently full of thought, sat staring at the fire. "I know what's brought you here—I expected it! You've had Margaret Hilson to see you—she'd tell you she'd seen me already. Well, Mr. Blick is fully conversant with her story, so——"

Chilford looked from one to the other.

"Something more than Margaret Hilson's story brought me here, Fransemmery," he answered. "I've seen her, of course—she called on me late this afternoon. I didn't know what to think of her story, exactly, as long as it was just hers, unsupported. But since seven o'clock, this evening, I've known it to be true—in every detail!"

"You have?" exclaimed Mr. Fransemmery. "How now?"

Chilford waved a hand towards the window from which, had it not been night and the blinds drawn, they would have looked across the park to Markemore Court.

"The successor to the title and estates is down there!" he said. "A boy of six!—quite unaware of what he's come into!"

Mr. Fransemmery glanced at Blick, and saw that what he himself was thinking about was also in the detective's thoughts—the question raised by Mrs. Braxfield as to marriage or no marriage.

"You're sure, then, of his right?" he said, turning to Chilford. "But—how has he turned up? This is something unexpected, isn't it?"

"Hadn't the ghost of a notion that any such development would occur," answered Chilford. "Nobody ever suggested to me that Guy Markenmore had been married—I always understood that he never had! And when that woman, Margaret Hilson, came to me this evening, just after I'd returned from my office, with the story she'd already told you, I was more than a little amazed. But I know her for a decent, respectable woman, not at all likely to invent fairy-tales, nor, for that matter, to tell what she didn't believe to be true, and when I'd heard her, I began to think there might be, well, something in it. And do you know, Fransemmery, she hadn't left my house half an hour when there drove up from Selcaster railway station a well-known London solicitor, Quillamane, of Bedford Row, who brought with him a lady and a small boy, and a story agreeing entirely with that which I'd just listened to. What's more," concluded Chilford, with a dry laugh and a wink at Mr. Fransemmery, "he brought full documentary proofs of all that he had to tell. Pooh!—the thing's quite clear. There's a Sir Guy Markenmore in Markenmore Court tonight!—and he's six years old!"

"Then Guy Markenmore did marry Myra Halliwell?" said Mr. Fransemmery.

"He did!—when they both left here," answered Chilford. "And they lived very quietly, Clapham or Tooting or Wandsworth way, at first. Later, she lived there alone—he was a good deal away from her, and had a West End flat. She died—but there's the boy. Quillamane knows the whole thing—has all the papers, marriage certificates, birth certificates, everything: he has been in Guy's confidence all along. When the child's mother died, the child was placed in the hands of Quillamane's sister, who's now with him at the Court—they're all there: I took them up, myself."

"And Harry Markenmore and his sister—how did they take it?" asked Mr. Fransemmery.

"To tell you the truth, they took it like bricks!" replied Chilford. "They didn't turn a hair, either of 'em, and to do them justice, they immediately began to make much of the youngster. But I say!—I reckon I know who'll be furious about it! Why, I heard that Harry Markenmore has secretly married Poppy Wrenne, with her mother's knowledge!"

"That's so!" said Mr. Fransemmery. "The marriage took place in London, three months ago, in the mother's presence."

"Then Madam Braxfield will be the angriest woman in Christendom when she hears of this!" exclaimed Chilford. "Of course, she was hoping that Guy was dead long since, and nobody'd ever heard of him for seven years, and that Harry would get the title, and Poppy be my Lady Markenmore! Well—that's knocked on the head! Queer business! and Quillamane tells me there may be more. It turns out that

Guy, who'd made a regular pot of money in his business doings, all left, of course, to the youngster by a recent will, wanted to give Markenmore Court absolutely to his brother and sister, and was going to take steps to hand it over as soon as he succeeded. But the estates are entailed! This child gets everything! Interesting, isn't it, Fransemmer, from a lawyer's point of view?"

"From that point—very," agreed Mr. Fransemmer. "Complicated, too."

He was wondering if Chilford wanted to expatiate on the intricacies of the situation, and hoping he didn't, for he himself felt in no humour for discussing legal questions. But Chilford presently went away and Blick, after a whispered word with Mr. Fransemmer, went with him. Together, they walked towards the village, on the outskirts of which Chilford lived.

"Any luck in your line yet, young man?" asked Chilford, before they parted.

"Precious little!" replied Blick.

"As mysterious a case as ever I heard of!" exclaimed Chilford. "Not a ray of light on it!"

Blick left him at the cross-roads and turned into the Sceptre. Remembering Crawley, and not averse to a friendly chat before retiring, he looked into the bar-parlour and asked for him. Grimsdale, reading a paper behind his bar, shook his head.

"Never been back, Mr. Blick," he answered. "He ordered his dinner for seven o'clock, but he didn't come in for it. Ain't set eyes on him since he went out just after breakfast; I suppose he's altered his mind and gone elsewhere. Don't signify, neither—he paid his bill!"

CHAPTER XIX

UNDER PRESSURE

The bodies of Sir Anthony Markenmore and his elder son were duly laid to rest in the family burial ground in Markenmore churchyard next day at noon, in the presence of a crowd whose members had flocked into the old village from all parts of the surrounding country. Folk of all sorts and conditions assembled in the church itself and under the ancient elms and yews that fenced in its grey walls; the last ceremonies over they split up into groups, discussing the latest news appertaining to the fortunes of the Markenmore family. By that time everybody in the place knew that Guy Markenmore had left a son, and that he had come into the title and estates: many of the onlookers had hurried to the churchyard in hopes of seeing the new baronet. But all they saw was Harry Markenmore and two or three kinsmen; no women of the family were present, and there was nothing remarkable nor spectacular: the curtain went down on this act of the drama quietly and uneventfully, and when those present had seen the last of Guy Markenmore, laid side by side with his father, and in close proximity to his many dead and gone ancestors, they fell back on the oft-repeated question—who was responsible for his tragic end?

Blick saw nothing of these obsequies. He was not

concerned with the dead. His one object was to lay hands on a living person—the murderer of Guy Markenmore. That person was somewhere; possibly far off by that time; possibly closer at hand than he knew. It was a difficult chase, and the quarry was clear out of sight and the scent poor, but Blick was casting round, and by perseverance, aided by luck, he hoped to get on the trail. And certainly he had got something to go on in the strange revelation of yesterday, and in the fortunate discovery of the automatic pistol. Full of thoughts and speculations about one, and with the other in his pocket, he set out for Selcaster as soon as his early breakfast was over, and by ten o'clock was closeted with the Chief Constable. To him he detailed all the news gained since the previous morning.

The Chief Constable listened and wondered. Like Blick, his thoughts turned to the question: Had these revelations about Guy Markenmore's secret marriage of seven years ago anything to do with his murder? He discussed the likelihood and probabilities of this for some time, but suddenly turned off to a more pertinent subject.

"That, however, is all mere speculation; though, as you say, Blick, there may be a good deal in it," he remarked. "But the finding of that automatic pistol, so near the scene of the murder, is quite a different matter. Now, how on earth did it come to be in that burrow, or hole, or whatever it is?"

"You mean—how did it come to be there unless it was put there!" said Blick. "Of course, it was dropped in there by somebody who wanted to get rid of it!—how else could it have come there? Let's suppose that that somebody was the actual murderer.

He came away from the scene of his crime, crossed the hill-side in front of Woodland Cottage——”

“More likely, followed the line of the coppice behind it,” suggested the Chief Constable, with a glance at a big map hung on the wall by his desk. “He’d be hidden from view, that way.”

“Well, that way, then,” agreed Blick. “Anyhow, he comes to Deep Lane. Going down there, he resolves to get rid of his weapon. There are any amount of holes in the banks there, behind the banks and the undergrowth at the foot of the high hedges. He pushes aside the bushes and drops his weapon into one of the deepest holes. And there it might have lain for ages—if it hadn’t been for Franssemery’s dog.”

“Well, you’ve found it, anyway, and the next thing to do is to find out to whom it belongs,” said the Chief Constable. “Stiff business, but it can be done.” He picked up the automatic pistol, which Blick had laid before him, and looked at it with speculative eyes. “Seems to be brand-new,” he remarked. “I wonder if it was bought from anybody about here?”

“I’m going to enquire into that at once,” answered Blick. “Such things can be bought in Selcaster, I suppose?”

“You can buy sporting guns and revolvers in plenty,” replied the Chief Constable. “And no doubt things of this sort. There are two or three gunsmiths in the city, and of course there are ironmongers and hardware dealers who sell fire-arms.” He picked up a small volume from amongst a row of reference books on his desk. “Local directory,” he explained. “You’ll find names and addresses there.”

Blick made a list of names, and went out on a voyage of discovery. He called on half a dozen tradesmen, who, once they were aware of his identity and business, and had been pledged to secrecy, were only too ready to chat confidentially with a famous London detective. But they could give him no information—not one had seen the automatic pistol before. It was not until he made his last call that he got any help or signs of it. Then, however, the shop-keeper was somewhat doubtful as to whether he hadn't seen that particular article before, some time or other.

"I've an idea that we may have supplied that," he remarked. "But I'll tell you what—you look in here about six o'clock this evening, or any time between that and seven. For this reason: I have a branch shop at Chilhampton, and my manager is there today, and won't be back till late this afternoon. Now, if we ever sold that pistol—as I fancy we did—he'll know all about it, and who the purchaser was; he's more up in that department than I am. Come again at six or thereabouts; if I'm not in, ask for Mr. Waters, and tell him what you've told me. You can trust him."

Blick thanked him and went out. A policeman who stood staring around him on the opposite side of the street, caught sight of and came across to him.

"The Chief sent me out to look for you, Mr. Blick," he announced as he came up. "He says will you go back to his office?—there's a young man called that he wants you to see. This Markenmore affair, he said."

Blick hurried back to the police-station, and to the Chief Constable's room. In a chair by the fireside

sat the young man to whom the policeman had referred, watching the Chief Constable, who was reading and signing documents. He was a very meek and mild young man, thought Blick, as far as appearance went; an intellectual of some sort, evidently. He had a very high, broad forehead; a mass of long and untidy hair brushed back from it; a pair of large, somewhat brilliant eyes; a wide, sensitive mouth, and a generally high-strung aspect. Blick's sharp eyes took all this in at a glance; he also observed that the young man's black coat was very much stained in front, as though he was in the bad habit of spilling things on it, and that his long, delicately-fashioned fingers were also stained—his hands, in fact, from wrists to finger-tips were disfigured with odd patches of green, purples, and scarlets. A queer-looking chap, thought the detective, and yet, no ordinary one.

The Chief Constable signed a big blue paper, pushed it away from him, laid down his pen, and swung round in his chair. He waved a hand towards the figure on the hearth.

"This young gentleman has looked in to say that he's been reading about the Markenmore problem in the papers, and that he thinks he can throw some light on it," he announced, glancing at Blick. "I waited till you came before hearing what he's got to say. Now," he continued, nodding at the visitor, "you can go ahead! This is Detective-Sergeant Blick, of the Criminal Investigation Department, who has this case in hand. You can tell him and me anything you like—in privacy and confidence. And first of all—to whom are we talking?"

The visitor looked from one man to the other and spoke in quiet, even tones.

"My name is Spindler," he answered, "Eustace Spindler—I'm an assistant in Moore and Smith's chemist and druggists, Farsham."

"I know it—very good, high-class business," said the Chief Constable. "Old established." He turned and threw an aside to Blick, who had sat down near him. "This is the chap Lansbury told us of," he whispered. "The chap who had the secret to sell." He looked round again at the caller. "Well, Mr. Spindler," he continued, "glad to hear anything you can tell."

"It is in strict confidence, of course?" enquired Spindler. "Strictly between ourselves—at present, at any rate?"

"You put it in the precise fashion," assented the Chief Constable. "At present—at any rate."

"Well," continued Spindler, with a nod of agreement, "what I wanted to tell you was, and is, this—and I may say that I came here as much for my own satisfaction as to give information. I am, as I said, an assistant chemist—a qualified assistant, that is to say, I've passed all my exams. Now, for the last year or two, I've spent my spare time in experimenting in the preparation of synthetic dyes. I daresay you gentlemen are aware that up to now our dyers in this country have been almost entirely dependent on Germany for their aniline dyes——"

"We are!" said the Chief Constable solemnly. "Pretty well known, I believe, Mr. Spindler, that we've been shamefully behind-hand in that matter!"

"Just so—we have," assented Spindler. "Well, to put the matter briefly, I have discovered a certain secret as regards the preparation of a valuable syn-

thetic dye: a most important secret. And when I'd got it fully perfected, I naturally wanted to make some money out of it. So I advertised in *The Times*, indicating what I'd got to sell. My advertisement was answered by Mr. Guy Markenmore. In consequence of his letter, I went to see him at his office in Folgrave Court, in London—near Cornhill. I told him all about my discovery, and he asked me how much I would take for my secret. Now, I am a poor man, but I have good ideas, and I want to do certain things, and one is to buy the business—a small, undeveloped business, yet, but capable in my hands of great development—of a manufacturing chemist, which I can get for a very reasonable price. I thought things over and told Mr. Markenmore I would take three thousand pounds cash. He then asked me if I would entrust him with my papers—the formula, you understand, of my secret—so that he might submit them to an expert. I consented, on condition that the expert was somebody I could trust. We fixed on Professor Sir Thomas Hodges-Wilkins, of Cambridge—the famous chemist. I then gave Mr. Markenmore the papers. A week later he wrote to me, saying he would buy at my price if he could get a couple of other financiers to join him in the venture. I wrote back to him and asked him, if he bought, to let me have the money in cash. I made this request, because I intended to pay cash for the business I've referred to, and didn't want anybody to know how much money I had—no bankers, no nobody, you understand. He replied that that was all right, and that he'd probably call on me, at Farshams, in a few days, and hand me the money. And after that," concluded

Spindler, spreading out his thin hands, "I never heard anything till I read of this murder!—and what I want to know is—where are my papers, my valuable secret?"

"And your three thousand pounds!" muttered the Chief Constable, aside to Blick. "Well, Mr. Spindler," he said aloud, "I can assure you that no scientific papers of the sort you refer to were found on Mr. Guy Markenmore's dead body—we have everything that was found. But just tell me—that formula of yours? Supposing it fell into the hands of anybody who knew what it was—what it was all about, I mean—would it be of use?"

"Of use?" vociferated Spindler. "I should just think it would! Why, of course, it tells exactly how to manufacture this particular dye!"

"Then—it would be worth anybody's while to steal it?" asked the Chief Constable.

"Worth anybody's while?" exclaimed Spindler. "Goodness gracious me!—don't I tell you Markenmore was giving three thousand pounds for it?"

"Just for the papers?"

"The secret is on the paper—a paper—an ordinary sheet of note-paper! There were, of course, some other papers—memoranda. But if *the* paper falls into the hands of—of anybody—why, of course, my secret's lost! Are you sure it wasn't on Markenmore's body?—just a sheet?—it would look like a prescription."

They saw by that time why Mr. Eustace Spindler had called. It was not to give information, but to get news. And they had none to give him.

"There were no papers of that sort on Markenmore," said Blick. "But—they may be at his office

in London, or at his private residence. We'll do what we can for you, Mr. Spindler, and as soon as possible."

But when Spindler had gone, highly concerned, and dissatisfied, Blick turned to the Chief Constable and shook his head.

"We know from what Lansbury told us that Guy Markenmore had the papers this chap speaks of on him that night at the Sceptre!" he observed. "He must have had, because it was about them and the secret and the price that the discussion was. Probably he had the formula and Professor What's-his-name's opinion on it. In that case he'd have them when he left the Sceptre—put them all together with the three thousand pounds' worth of bank-notes. And whoever murdered him got 'em—with the notes!"

"There's another alternative," remarked the Chief Constable. "He no doubt had the notes on him. But he may have handed over the formula and opinion to one of his fellow-purchasers."

"Not to Lansbury," declared Blick. "He'd have told us."

"There was a third man," said the Chief Constable, meaningly. "Von Eckhardstein."

Blick took two or three paces about the room, thinking.

"I wish we could follow that up!" he exclaimed suddenly. "That fellow's disappeared, and we've done nothing whatever to trace him. How do we know, after all, in spite of his being the wealthy man he's reputed to be, that for purposes of his own he didn't shoot Guy Markenmore and appropriate the money and the formula?"

"Possible!" agreed the Chief Constable. "But as

to tracing him, we've done all we can here, and we've ascertained that he hasn't turned up at any of his usual haunts in London, or in the City. Yet—he's vanished! Suddenly, too! Now—why?"

Blick paced the room again, thinking still more intently.

"I wonder if Mrs. Tretheroe knows more than she's told!" he said suddenly. "I've a conviction—a sort of intuition—that she does."

"I've had a suspicion of that sort all along," answered the Chief Constable. "My own personal belief is that I don't believe her a bit!"

"Well," said Blick, after more thought, "there's one thing we can do."

"What?"

"Go out there, both of us, this afternoon," replied Blick. "Put pressure on her! Bluff her! Make her think we know something. Come with me, and leave the talking to me. I'll force something out of her."

"Very good—after lunch," agreed the Chief Constable. "It's a chance!"

Mrs. Tretheroe, alone in her boudoir late that afternoon, was neither surprised nor displeased when Daffy Halliwell announced the Chief Constable and Mr. Blick. The Chief Constable, as an ex-Army officer of rank, was likely to be quite agreeable as a visitor, and Blick was a young man of good looks and interesting personality. She welcomed both with some show of pleasure.

"I hope you've brought me some news of Baron von Eckhardstein," she said as she pointed them to chairs near her own. "It's really most distressing that I've heard nothing yet, though I'm sure I've

done everything that I could to find him in this neighbourhood—organized search parties and I don't know what. Have you heard anything through your police people?"

"A great deal, Mrs. Tretheroe!" replied Blick.

Mrs. Tretheroe started and glanced sharply at the detective. These were not the tones in which he had addressed her on his previous visit—his voice now was official, firm, almost menacing; he spoke like a man who has got the whip-hand of the person he is addressing. And after her sharp glance at him Mrs. Tretheroe paled a little; she was conscious that two pairs of masculine eyes were fixed on her, not in admiration, but in something very like stern scrutiny.

"What—what do you mean?" she faltered.

"What is it—what's happened?"

"What has happened is this, Mrs. Tretheroe," replied Blick. "We know a great deal more, now, than you seemed to think we know, about the recent doings of von Eckhardstein. Von Eckhardstein was the third man of the three who met at the Sceptre last Monday night—oh, it's no use your protesting, Mrs. Tretheroe!—he was! It was he who went there at two o'clock in the morning, and—mind this!—he was the last man in whose company Guy Markenmore was seen alive!"

Mrs. Tretheroe uttered a faint cry—evidently one of genuine astonishment.

"No—no!" she exclaimed. "I can't believe——"

"Quite immaterial what you believe," said Blick, with well-assumed indifference. "We know it! Now, Mrs. Tretheroe, all this pretended concern of yours about von Eckhardstein's being lost through

some accident is all pretence! I tell you we know things. Now, you haven't been candid with us up to now, and you're running into serious danger. Out with it, Mrs. Tretheroe! You know very well that von Eckhardstein left your house at a late hour the other night—intentionally? Where is he now?"

He waited with secret impatience, doubting even then if his fish would rise. But Mrs. Tretheroe, after an almost terrified glance at the Chief Constable's stern face, spoke, faintly.

"I believe—in Paris!"

"How did he get away from here?" demanded Blick.

"He waited till all was quiet, then walked across to Carfant, and got a motor-car to run him along the coast-road to Newhaven, to catch the early morning boat for Dieppe."

"Why did he go away like that?"

"He said," answered Mrs. Tretheroe, in a very low voice, "because he didn't want to be mixed up in the sordid details of a vulgar murder, and he'd go across to the Continent until you'd got the real man and the thing was settled."

Blick got up, and silently motioned his companion to follow. Mrs. Tretheroe rose, too, white and trembling.

"You—you don't think he killed Guy?" she whispered. "You surely don't say he did?"

"At present—we say nothing," answered Blick, and went away. But once outside the Dower House he turned to the Chief Constable.

"Worked like a charm!" he muttered. "Well—what next?"

Then he remembered the gunsmith at Selcaster and hurried back there in the Chief Constable's dog-cart.

The gunsmith met him as he turned in at his shop-door, and drew him aside.

"I've found out about that automatic pistol for you," he whispered. "We did sell it! About three months ago. We sold it to Mr. Harry Markenmore, of Markenmore Court. Like to see the entry?"

CHAPTER XX

VILLAGE GOSSIP

The Chief Constable had followed close upon Blick's heels when the detective walked into the gunsmith's shop, and he caught the whispered information. Not as accustomed as Blick was to reserve of speech and stolidity of expression he let out a word of surprise, scarcely checked. But Blick said nothing, and his only sign was one of assent to the gunsmith's proposition: together the three men went to the back of the shop, where a sharp looking young man was busy with account books.

"My manager, Mr. Waters," said the gunsmith. "Waters—just show these gentlemen that entry we looked up a while ago."

Waters produced a day-book, turned over its pages, ran his fingers over the lines, and silently pointed to an entry and some figures. Blick glanced at them.

"You remember selling a Webley-Fosbery automatic pistol to Mr. Harry Markenmore?" he asked, turning to the manager. "I mean—you sold it, personally?"

"I sold it," assented Waters. "I remember it well enough. He wanted a revolver—I recommended that."

"Would you know it again?" asked Blick.

Waters pointed to some figures and letters in the entry.

"That's the number," he said.

Blick produced the weapon he had picked up from beneath the Airedale terrier's busy feet.

"That it?" he enquired.

Waters turned the automatic pistol over in his hand, and looked carefully at the figures and letters stamped into the mount.

"That's it!" he answered. "Oh, yes—but I should have known it again without that."

"There's no doubt about it?" said Blick. "No possibility of any mistake? You're sure that is the pistol you sold, on that date, to Mr. Harry Markenmore?"

"There's not the slightest doubt," replied Waters confidently. "Take my oath of it!"

Blick put the automatic pistol back in his pocket and turned away.

"I hope that won't be necessary, Mr. Waters," he said. "However——" here he looked at the gunsmith, who, with the Chief Constable, had stood by, watching and listening—"in the meantime keep all this to yourself—don't mention it to anybody. I may as well tell you, in confidence, that I found this thing—and it may have been lost by its owner—dropped, quite innocently. So—for the present—silence!"

The gunsmith and his manager nodded comprehendingly, and Blick and the Chief Constable went out into the street and walked some little distance in silence.

"Another complication!" muttered Blick at last. "And I suppose it's within bounds of possibility

246 THE MARKENMORE MYSTERY

that Harry Markenmore shot his brother and threw this thing away in Deep Lane! Possible! but, I think, not at all probable. However, I'll soon make sure about that."

"How?" asked the Chief Constable.

"According to the medical evidence," answered Blick, "Guy Markenmore was shot dead at Markenmore Hollow about four o'clock in the morning. Now it was just about that hour that Sir Anthony Markenmore died at Markenmore Court, and I imagine that his younger son would be at his bedside. Harry Markenmore couldn't be in two places at once. Still, how came this automatic pistol in that badger-hole? That's got to be answered—somehow! For without a doubt, it was dropped in there by somebody who wanted to get rid of it."

The Chief Constable suddenly laid one hand on the detective's arm, and with the other pointed across the street.

"There's the very man who will know what Harry Markenmore was doing, and exactly where he was on the night of his father's death!" he exclaimed. "Come across!"

Blick looked in the direction indicated, and saw Braxfield. The old butler, very solemn and precise in his mourning raiment, was just emerging from a chemist's shop, sundry small parcels in his hands. He lifted startled eyes as the Chief Constable accosted him.

"Good evening, Braxfield," said the Constable, affably. "How are you in these trying times?"

Braxfield shook his head.

"Trying indeed they are, sir!" he replied. "I have felt this week, sir, as if the world was being

turned upside down—my world at any rate! I never knew such times, sir, nor expected to know such!”

“You’ve certainly had a good deal of trouble at Markenmore, Braxfield,” said the Chief Constable, sympathetically. “Must have been a time of great anxiety to everybody who’d lived a quiet life hitherto, as I think you’ve done.”

Braxfield shook his head again, and looked as mournful as his garments.

“It’s not been so much the trouble, sir, nor yet the anxiety, though both have been bad enough, as the continual surprises!” he answered. “One after the other they’ve come, till my poor head has fairly ached under them! Mr. Guy’s coming—his father’s death—that dreadful murder—hearing that my step-daughter was married, secret-like, to Sir Harry, as we then thought him—this little boy being brought and presented as the real heir—and all the rest of it; dear me, sir, it’s as if you didn’t know whatever to expect next!”

“Ah, well, you’ll get settled down in time, Braxfield,” remarked the Chief Constable. “The little boy is, of course, a great surprise. How does Mr. Harry take the sudden change in his fortunes?”

“Mr. Harry, sir, and Miss Valencia,” replied Braxfield, “have taken the matter in the best way possible. The little gentleman—Sir Guy, of course—has been welcomed in the warmest fashion; he is already made as much of by his uncle and aunt as if they’d known him from his cradle. Family feeling, sir, is strong in such houses as ours!”

“I suppose Mr. Harry was fond of his father, Sir

Anthony?" asked the Chief Constable, with an almost imperceptible side-glance at Blick. "Very constant in attendance upon him, I believe?"

"Mr. Harry, sir," answered Braxfield, "was a very good son to his father, especially as Sir Anthony drew near his latter end. He was for ever at his bedside—never left him, except when Miss Valencia took his place."

"Was he with him when he died?" enquired the Chief Constable, coming at last to the question which Blick desired to have answered.

"He was, sir! Mr. Harry," said Braxfield, "was with my late master all that night, from the time Mr. Guy went away until Sir Anthony died—which he did in a light sleep. Yes, sir, Mr. Harry has nothing to reproach himself for in respect of his behaviour to his father—and I would have wished, sir, that he had come into the title and estates. But the law, I believe, is the law, sir, as you know better than I do—and all Markenmore, and the old title belongs to the little boy! Strange changes, sir, indeed, but you'll excuse me, gentlemen—I see our groom waiting for me in our trap, and I've still a little shopping to do."

The old butler hurried away after a polite bow, and the Chief Constable turned to Blick.

"That disposes of any question of Harry Markenmore's possible guilt," he murmured. "He spent that night by his father's bedside. So he couldn't have been at Markenmore Hollow."

"Never thought he had," said Blick. "But I think his automatic pistol was there. And now I'm going back to the Sceptre, to get my much-needed supper, and think a bit."

"Tomorrow's Sunday," observed the Chief Constable.

"I'm aware of it," replied Blick. "And as I have reason to believe that Sunday, amongst rustic communities, is a great day for gossip, I intend to hear what these Markenmore villagers are saying. I fancy they're saying a good deal amongst themselves."

"And how will you get to hear?—a stranger!" asked the Chief Constable with a laugh.

"Easily," replied Blick. "All village gossip either begins or ends at the village ale-house. I shall hear no end at the Sceptre, I think."

"One way of getting information, to be sure," assented the Chief Constable. "Well, Sunday or no Sunday, keep me posted up, Blick, if you hear of anything really pertinent."

Blick promised, and went off to Markenmore, and that night, of set purpose, he put his business clean out of his mind, and spent a quiet evening in reading the local histories and guide-books which he had procured from Selcaster when he first took up his quarters at the Sceptre. There was a great deal of interesting information in those books, and before he went to bed he had learned much about the Markenmore neighbourhood and the Markenmore family, whose pedigree, long and intricate, was given in full in one of the volumes. And next morning he stayed late in bed, and lounged mentally as well as physically, and it was not until after his mid-day dinner that he thought of his professional problem at all. It was recalled to him first when he strolled along the quiet street in the middle of the peaceful Sunday afternoon and came across Benny Cripps, the sexton, who sat

250 THE MARKENMORE MYSTERY

on a stone bench outside the lych-gate of the churchyard, smoking his pipe. There was a look of invitation in Benny's eye, and Blick sat down by him.

"Taking a bit of rest from your Sunday labours, eh?" he said. "Nice spot to smoke your pipe in, this."

"Custom o' mine," answered Benny. "I do allays smoke a pipe or two o' bacca here of a Sunday arternoon, year in, year out—wet or fine. I do keep that up. If 'tis fine weather, along o' this ancient stone bench; if so be as 'tis wet, under that there lych-gate. And while I smokes, I meditates."

"On what?" asked Blick.

"Different subjects at different times," answered the sexton. "If so be as you wants to know the precise nature of my speckylations on this here occasion, I may tell 'ee as how when you come along, I was a-thinking of you!"

"Of me, eh?" said Blick. "And what about me?"

"Thinking as how if you're a-endeavouring to find out about that there murder, 'tis a long furrow as lies afore 'ee," replied Benny. "And main stiff soil to plough through! You ain't got much forrader, I reckon, since I see 'ee last?"

"No!" admitted Blick.

The sexton took his long clay pipe out of his lips, and rubbed his nose reflectively with the stem.

"Well!" he remarked, after a pause. "There ain't no wiser man in all this here parish than what I'm reckoned for to be, and I do allow as all this here mystery have a woman at the bottom of it—sure-ly!"

“A woman?” exclaimed Blick.

“Well, it med be wimmin,” continued Benny. “Woman or wimmin, ’tis all one! Wimmin is pison! Ain’t never been nothing go wrong since ever this here old world was created out of nothing, as it do tell in first chapter of Genesis, but wimmin was at the bottom of it! I tell ’ee, sir, the wimmin makes all the mischief—men is peaceable animals, but wimmin is oneasy critters.”

“What would Mrs. Cripps say if she heard you?” asked Blick.

“Ain’t no Mrs. Cripps!” retorted Benny. “Not that there ain’t been! Been three on ’em, one time or another—buried ’em all, I did, and the last ’un it be five year ago. Never another, says I, when I covers her in—third time, says I, pays for all! They was tur’ble old toads, all three on ’em, and I fare to do deal better as a widow-man. If you ain’t a wed man, don’t ’ee ever go for to be one, my dear—’tain’t wuth it!”

“I’ll bear your advice in mind,” said Blick. “You’ve evidently tried it pretty well. But I say—what woman do you think’s at the bottom of this affair?”

“Med be one, and med be another,” replied Benny. “I ain’t at all comfortable in my mind about that there young Jezebel at the Dower House—deal too much mystery and queer goings-on about she to suit my disposition. Knowed her ever since she was the height o’ sixpennorth o’ copper, I have, and never knew her to do nothing but mischief. Reckon her’s something to do wi’ this affair, and keeps it so deep as my well. And then again there’s that

252 THE MARKENMORE MYSTERY

there Mistress Braxfield—I ain't no opinion o' she!"

"Why, what about her?" asked Blick. "Highly respectable woman, isn't she?"

Benny sniffed.

"Depends on what 'ee calls highly 'spectable," he answered. "Don't call it neither high nor yet 'spectable for a woman what used to keep a public-house to go marrying her gal, hole-and-corner like, to a young gentleman of old family! Low conduct, I calls it! But her thought as how there was a good chance of her daughter being my Lady Markenmore—that was her notion. And 'twouldn't surprise me if she wasn't at the bottom o' this, some way or another way. Wimmin, I tell 'ee, is allays at the bottom o' all unpleasantness. If 'ee was as well acquainted wi' the Bible as what I am—which ain't to be expected, considering as I be a pillar of the church—you'd know that what I tell 'ee is Gospel truth—so 'tis! Ain't you never heard tell about what Eve did to poor old Adam?"

"I've heard of that incident," admitted Blick. "Bit stiff, wasn't it?"

"I believe 'ee, my son! And so 'tis all through—the wimmin is allays deep down at the root o' all mischievousness," asserted Benny. "I could tell 'ee more tales o' wimmin nor you could find in a dozen books, and so I would, only it be time for our parson to come and catechize they young varmint o' children what you see trooping into my church, and I must go and keep order among they. But I tells 'ee straight, my dear, you seeming a decent and fair-spoken young feller, though no doubt a Londoner, which I don't hold wi', that if you wants to get at the bottom o' this here, you go a-looking for wimmin!

Wimmin is at the bottom of all battles, murders, and sudden deaths—and don't you forget it!"

Blick got no information out of this interview, but it made him think a great deal. He, too, was eminently suspicious about Mrs. Tretheroe. He had forced out of her an admission that von Eckhardstein had gone away with her full knowledge, and it was obvious that she had sent out her search-parties on the day after his fully arranged departure with intent to deceive the police authorities. But he found it difficult to believe that she had any knowledge of the murder; something told him that her first impetuous accusation of Harborough was genuine; genuine, too, he thought was her evident concern when she asked him, only the previous afternoon, if he thought that von Eckhardstein had killed Guy Markenmore. If, then, there was something which she knew, and was keeping back, what was it?—and what was her object in secrecy? From her, he turned to her maid; did Daffy Halliwell know anything? She gave one the impression, thought Blick, of being the sort of woman who had a habit, or the knack, of knowing things.

"And I should say," he muttered to himself, "she's a confoundedly clever hand at keeping them close when she does know them!"

That evening, tired of reading local history and topography, he went into the bar-parlour of the Sceptre and sat in a quiet corner. There were several men in the place, small farmers and village craftsmen; if they knew who Blick was, they gave small heed to his presence; their talk was free and unrestrained. For once Grimsdale was not behind his bar; the waitress from the little coffee-room

officiated in his stead; she had little to do, and seeing that she looked lonely and somewhat bored, Blick, who was naturally amiable, leaned over the counter and talked to her. But he kept one ear open for anything that was said by the men behind him. His experience was that you may pick up a good deal from a chance remark or stray hint.

The men, of course, were discussing the events of the previous Monday night and Tuesday morning; they had been discussing them for six days, and they would go on discussing them for many days longer—long, Blick felt sure, beyond the proverbial nine.

“ ’Tis a ’nation queer thing to me,” observed one man, “that such a matter can happen in a Christian country as that a young gentleman do get shot through’s head, and die of that, and nobody don’t know who done it! And what I says, frequent, since that do happen to he, I says again, and will say, and that be—what be the police folk about? Been me, I’d ha’ found him as done that and hanged him so high as our church steeple, before now!”

“Why don’t ’ee find him, then, Bob Gravus?” asked a cynical listener. “Bain’t naught to prevent ’ee!”

“ ’Tain’t my job, that!” retorted Bob Gravus. “I bain’t a policeman. But,” he added, with a sly wink in Blick’s direction, “if I bain’t mistook, I do allow as that there young gentleman be one o’ these here powerful clever London men, what they calls detectives, and I do s’pose that he very likely know a deal more ’bout this than we do!”

Feeling the eyes of the company on his back, Blick turned towards the last speaker.

"Make yourself easy, my friend!" he said. "I know no more than you do, I think. I should be glad to know a lot more."

"But you'm what I do say, bain't you, mister?" suggested Bob Gravus. "I hear you was, anyway."

"Well, you can take it I am," admitted Blick. "But I can't see through a brick wall, any more than you can!"

"'Tis a true saying, that!" remarked one of the company, solemnly. "Faith, yes, the powers of mortal man be terrible limited, as you med say. Things there is as man that is born of a woman can do, and things there is as he cannot do. And there ain't never been a man so fur as I knows on us could see through a brick wall. A true remark!"

"Well," said another, "it be a main powerful mystery who done it, and as difficult a thing to find out as I reckon it 'ud be to lift Selcaster Cathedral wi' a jack-screw. And you can't go for to walk around the neighbourhood a-saying to one and then to another 'Was it you as done this terrible wicked deed'—can't, nohow! 'Cause why? They'd all say they didn't!"

There was a murmur of general approval at this piece of wisdom. But a dark-faced man who sat in a corner and who had listened in silence up to that point, suddenly lifted his pot of ale, drank from it, and set it down again with an emphatic bang.

"Tell 'ee all what I do think, and no two ways about it!" he exclaimed. "This here shooting o' Master Guy Markenmore what you're all talking so free about and don't get no forrarder—I do think as how Mistress Braxfield, up to Woodland Cottage, did shoot he! That's what I do say. Mistress

256 THE MARKENMORE MYSTERY

Braxfield, as kept this house once—she done it!”

Blick turned sharply from the bar; the other men turned towards the speaker; a dead silence fell over the room, broken at last by a solemn voice.

“You’m best to mind what you’re a-saying of, Bill Carver!” it said. “There be law for them as slanders folk—you’ll be took to ’sizes! Beside, Master Guy, he be shooted with a revolver. Mistress Braxfield ain’t got no revolvers, and couldn’t shoot one if she had!”

“Ain’t she?” exclaimed Bill Carver, derisive and contemptuous. “Then I tells ’ee that she have! Many’s the time I seen her a-shooting with that, early of a morning when I bin about them downs. I seen her shoot a score o’ times at foxes what comes arter her chickens. And when you says who shot Master Guy Markenmore, I says Mistress Braxfield did shoot he! That’s what I say—and don’t care who hears me say it! Ain’t I free to say what I do think?—’tis a free country!”

CHAPTER XXI

ARREST

A period of tense silence followed on this bold declaration, ended at last by a shuffling of feet and a succession of dry, deprecating coughs. Then a voice came out of the smoke-laden depths of a far corner.

“ ’Tis all very well to say as how this here is a free country,” remarked the voice, “but I do allow as ’tain’t so free as that a man may call murder agin a woman! That there be what they call libel and slander, what folks goes to ’sizes for—it be a punishable matter that. I count as how you’ll git yourself into sore tribulation, Bill Carver, if so be as you do go up and down a-saying that Mistress Braxfield her did murder pore young Muster Guy—so you will!”

“Ain’t a-saying as how her did murder he!” retorted Bill Carver. “What I says is that ’tis my belief as how her did shoot he dead—main different matter! Might ha’ bin done accidental, like!”

“Oh, if ’twas accidental, like, ’tis a vastly different circumstance!” said the correcting voice. “There’s bin a deal o’ serious and bloody murders done accidental, I do allow! But it seem strange if this here catastrophe bin brought about i’ that way. Mistress Braxfield, she say nothing o’ that, so far.”

“ ’Tain’t likely as her would,” declared Bill Carver. “Her’ve more sense! Ain’t no ’casion as I knows on for any man or woman to go for to

accuse theirselves o' terrible doings. Wouldn't be a common-sense thing for anybody as that happened to come for'rard and say as they done it! Ain't Christian conduct for anybody to walk into a trap wi' his eyes open, I do reckon."

" 'Tis very true!" assented another wiseacre. "Noo—I don't count as how any well-disposed, law abiding citizen have any call to 'criminate his-self—'tis agin religion and nature, which is powerful commodities. Noo!—I reckon that if Mistress Braxfield done this, accidental like, wi' that pistol what Bill Carver refer to, she say to herself 'Well,' she say, 'this here is a sad misfortune to happen to me, but I ain't no call to tell about it,' she say, and then, of course, she say nothing. That be the way of it—common-sense, like. And we all knows that accidents does happen to the meekest of us!"

"Accident'll happen to I, if I don't get home-along?" remarked Bill Carver with a laugh, as he rose from his corner and made for the door. "My old woman, she do have supper ready nine o'clock Sunday nights, and if I ain't to the minute, her'll let me hear the sound of her tongue. I bids 'ee all a good night!"

He strode out amidst a chorus of farewells, but stopped in the hall, pulled up by a tap on his arm, and turned to find Blick at his elbow.

"A word with you," said Blick. "Come in here." He led Carver into his sitting-room, and closed the door. "You know what I am, Carver?" he went on in a low voice. "A detective! Very well—now, I heard what you said in there. Is it true that you've seen Mrs. Braxfield shooting at things with a pistol—early of a morning?"

“True enough, master,” replied Carver. “I seen her do that more than once. Been working up in they woods all this winter and spring, I have, and gone to my work uncommon early since the mornings got light. I seen Mistress Braxfield out about her house now and again, taking a pop at they foxes—there’s a wealth o’ them varmints up there, and I did hear her say as they was allays at her chickens. Oh, aye, I seen her wi’ her pistol!”

“You didn’t see her last Tuesday morning?—the morning Mr. Guy was shot?”

“I didn’t, master, ’cause I wasn’t in them parts at all, that day—I was over t’other side of Greycloister, two miles off.” He paused, regarding the detective with knowing eyes. “Don’t want to make no trouble, master,” he went on, suddenly, “but I could ha’ said a deal more in there than what I did say!”

“What?” demanded Blick. “If you know anything, tell it!”

“Don’t know anything partic’lar,” said Carver. “But I said, in there—accidental! Nor, there is them in the village what says—on purpose!”

“Do you mean that there are people in Markenmore who are saying that Mrs. Braxfield meant to shoot Mr. Guy?” asked Blick. “Is that it?”

“That’s it, master!” replied Carver. “They are saying it, some of ’em, round about where I lives—on one Mitbourne road. But only since it come out that Mistress Braxfield’s lass—young Poppy—be wed to Master Harry. When that comes out, the folk began to talk same as I do tell ’ee. ‘Ah!’ says they. ‘That be the true colour of it! Her shooted Master Guy so’s his poor brother could be Sir Harry and that young damsel be my Lady Markenmore! So ’tis,’ says they;

'ain't no doubt on 't.' But you'll bear in mind, master, as how I don't say that. I do say her, very like, shooted he accidental."

Blick paid no attention to Carver's personal opinion; he was thinking of the common gossip.

"Are many of them saying that?" he asked. "Your neighbours, I mean?"

"All on 'ems a-saying of it!" declared Carver. "Down our way, you understand—far end o' the village. Them here chaps what you sees i' th' bar there, they belong to this end o' the place—us don't know what they'm thinking. But down along wi' us, that be the general talk—her shooted Master Guy so's Master Harry 'ud be Sir Harry, and the young gel' ud be my lady! See, master?" He paused again—and again gave the detective a shrewd, knowing look. "Her's a sharp, spry female, Mistress Braxfield!" he continued suddenly. "I could tell 'ee more nor that, only I ain't one for to get nobody into trouble. But so I could!"

"If you know anything, you ought to tell it," said Blick. "What do you mean, now, about Mrs. Braxfield?"

"Well, master, I tells 'ee," said Carver, after a pause. "Mebbe you didn't see I, but I was up at that Crouner's 'quest what they held at the Court. Mistress Braxfield, her wented into the witness-box and gived evidence. Her said as how her see'd Master Harborough at a certain place on the hill-side from her chamber window, at a certain time that Tuesday morning. Master, her didn't do nothing o' that sort! Her couldn't see that place from her chamber window!—'tis impossible! I did help to build that there house of hers—Woodland Cottage—

and from her chamber window you couldn't see that place where she said her did see Master John. But—her could ha' seen it, and him, or whoever was there, from somewhere else, where very like her was!"

"Where?" demanded Blick.

"Bit of a spinney, right against Markenmore Hollow," answered Carver. "Where I seen her, more than once, a-looking out for they foxes."

Blick suddenly remembered his big Ordnance Survey Map, still pinned against the wall. He led Carver over to it, and pointed out certain landmarks.

"I seen a drawing like this afore, master," said Carver. "Old Muster Tompkins, to Beech Farm, he have one o' them here, framed, in his parlour—many's the time I've studied he when I bin waiting there for the old gentleman to give me my orders. And I'll show 'ee what I do mean about what I say." He pulled out a wooden match from his pocket, and proceeded to point out places and trace lines on the map before him. "Now here be Woodland Cottage, master, so plainwritten as never was, and there be the spot where Mistress Braxfield do say she see Muster Harborough. But, as you see, between them two places there be the rise of a bit of a hill! Her couldn't see through that, nohow, could her? No! But now you comes along here, as it med be, from her house, across the hill-side, to this here bit of a spinney, on the edge of Markenmore Hollow, and you sees that from that her could see, straight down, to the place where she said she see Muster Harborough: 'tis all visible, so to speak, from that. There med be no doubt her did see Muster Harborough at that particular spot that morning, but her didn't see him from her chamber window, 'cause her couldn't! If her

see'd him at all, her see'd him from that spinney, where I assures 'ee I see her more than once, popping at they foxes."

"Did you ever see the pistol she used?" asked Blick. He was certain by then that at last he had got on a definite trail, and he felt that he might as well pursue it.

"Seen it in her hand, time and again," replied Carver.

Blick suddenly produced the automatic pistol and held it out to his companion.

"Was that it?" he asked.

Carver looked down at the exhibit with a flash of curiosity.

"Well!" he exclaimed. "If 'tain't, 'tis the very spit and image of that there what I sees her handle! But they things be pretty much of a muchness, I reckon, master."

Blick put the automatic pistol back in his pocket, and laid his hand on Carver's arm.

"Now, look here!" he said. "Just you keep all this to yourself, there's a good man! Don't say a word about it to anybody—not even to your wife. I hope you won't get into trouble by being late for your supper. But—silence, now—not a word!"

"I understand 'ee, master," responded Carver, with a knowing grin. "And I 'on't go for to breathe a syllable till you tells I 'tis convenient. Howsomer, do 'ee remember, master, as how what I says is—accidental it med be! Ain't no sort of hands at shootin' off guns and pistols, isn't wimmin, as you knows."

When Carver had departed into the night, Blick walked up and down his sitting-room for a good ten minutes, thinking. At the end of that time he went

up to his bedroom, got into an overcoat, and made ready for going out. Descending to the hall, he encountered Grimsdale, just entering the house.

"Late walk, Mr. Blick?" asked the landlord, with a smile. "Fine night, too!"

"I'm going into Selcaster," replied Blick, "and look here—I don't think I shall be back tonight; I shall stay the night at the Mitre. You'll see me sometime tomorrow morning."

Grimsdale nodded in acquiescence and let his guest out. And Blick went away along the starlit road towards Selcaster, still thinking, speculating, putting things together, and all his thoughts and speculations came to a point in Mrs. Braxfield.

Mrs. Braxfield was in her tidy kitchen next morning at half-past eight o'clock, giving orders to the char-woman who always came to Woodland Cottage on Mondays, when a knock sounded on her front door. She opened the door herself, and confronted Blick, the Chief Constable, and another man—in plain clothes, but obviously a policeman. The three men, all watching her keenly, saw her start, frown, and turn pale. But they affected to notice nothing unusual, and the Chief Constable's voice, addressing her, was polite and cheery.

"Good morning, Mrs. Braxfield!" he said. "Just called to have a little chat with you, ma'am. May we come in?"

Mrs. Braxfield turned back into the hall, and opening a door, motioned her visitors into the room in which Blick had listened to Mr. Fransemmer's story three nights previously. The plain-clothes man, entering last, carefully closed the door, and remained standing before it.

"What do you want?" demanded Mrs. Braxfield. The colour had come back to her cheeks, and she was looking decidedly angry; anger, too, was apparent in her voice.

"We want to have a talk to you about last Tuesday morning, Mrs. Braxfield," replied the Chief Constable. "Just a quiet talk—between ourselves."

"I'm not so sure about that 'between ourselves!'" exclaimed Mrs. Braxfield with unmistakable asperity. "It strikes me that some folk, when they say 'between ourselves' mean a good deal of the very opposite. I believe some of you"—here she gave Blick an indignant glance—"some of you have been talking about me, behind my back! Here's my charwoman just come up from the village, and she says there's talk going on down there about me and the murder! Nay!—there's more! They're saying, some of them, that I had something to do with it—did it myself, some of them are saying, straight out! Now where's all that originated, I should like to know? But I'll find out—and then I'll see what my lawyer has to say!"

"Quite so, Mrs. Braxfield," agreed the Chief Constable. "You'll be quite within your rights to do that if false rumours are being spread about you. But we've heard of these rumours, and we want to ask a few questions. I'm sure you'll see that it will be advisable for you to answer them—eh, Mrs. Braxfield?"

"Depends what they are!" replied Mrs. Braxfield, still angry. "I shall please myself!"

"Well, the first thing is this," continued the Chief Constable, becoming somewhat sterner in manner. "I'm afraid you didn't tell the exact truth at the

inquest the other day. You said that you saw Mr. John Harborough at a certain spot on the hill-side from your chamber window—your bedroom window. Now, Mrs. Braxfield, you couldn't see him at that place from your bedroom window—there's the rise of a hill between your house and that particular place. What have you to say to that?"

Mrs. Braxfield had paled again, and started visibly at this, and her lips compressed themselves for an instant.

"I did see him all the same!" she said sullenly. "I might get mixed up about exactly where it was from, but——"

"Now, where was it from?" asked the Chief Constable. "Come!—you can't have forgotten that—an important matter!"

But Mrs. Braxfield's lips again compressed themselves, and in the middle of her pale cheeks, red, angry spots began to show.

"If you won't speak, I'll refresh your memory," said the Chief Constable. "Wasn't it from the edge of that little spinney near Markenmore Hollow? Come, now?"

"What if it was?" retorted Mrs. Braxfield.

"What were you doing there, at that time of the morning?" asked the Chief Constable.

"That's my business!" said Mrs. Braxfield with sudden defiance. "What have you to do with it?"

The Chief Constable shook his head.

"Oh, well!" he answered. "If you are going to adopt that tone, Mrs. Braxfield, we must show our hand a little more openly. Now, Mrs. Braxfield, listen to me; we know certain things. You've been in the habit of going to that spinney, or round about

it, very early of a morning, to have a shot at foxes; the foxes, we hear, have given you trouble about your fowls. Is that so?"

"What if it is?" demanded Mrs. Braxfield. "Do you think I'm going to have my valuable fowls and chickens carried off by foxes? I'm not!—not for all the hunting men in the country! So there! I wish I could shoot every fox that's running about! As it is, all I've done has been to frighten them."

"You can settle your affairs about the foxes with the Master of Foxhounds, Mrs. Braxfield," said the Chief Constable good-humouredly. "It's a truly awful crime to shoot a fox, in the opinion of hunting people, but it's one that doesn't come within police regulations. But now, Mrs. Braxfield, what did you use in shooting at the foxes? Was it a rifle, or a sporting gun, or a revolver? Or—was it an automatic pistol? Come!"

Mrs. Braxfield looked from one face to another. Three pairs of eyes were fixed firmly upon her.

"Who's been telling you all this?" she suddenly exclaimed. "Who's been——"

"It was an automatic pistol, wasn't it?" persisted the Chief Constable. "Come, now, Mrs. Braxfield, why not answer straight out?"

"What if it was?" muttered Mrs. Braxfield.

"Then it was! Very well; now then," continued the Chief Constable, "where did you get it?"

Mrs. Braxfield, who until then had been standing by the table in the centre of the room, facing her three visitors, suddenly sat down in the nearest chair, folded her hands on her lap, looked calmly from one to the other.

"Look here!" she said quietly, finally fixing her

eyes on the Chief Constable. "You no doubt think you're being very plain, and outspoken, and all that, but if you want any information out of me, you'll have to be a good deal plainer! And I'll tell you straight out that you're not going to get me to incriminate myself! I haven't said that I had any automatic pistol. You said: 'Was it an automatic pistol that I used, to scare the foxes?' I replied: 'What if it was?' That isn't saying that it was, or that I ever had one. I'm willing to give any information that I can, but you're treating me with suspicion, and I'm not going to be forced into any admission that might be damaging—damaging to me and to others, very likely. You treat me fair, and——"

"Mrs. Braxfield," broke in the Chief Constable, "we've no wish for anything else than to treat you fairly. But we know certain things, and we're bound to ask you for some explanation. Now, as you ask me to be more explicit, I will! I may as well tell you that an automatic pistol has been found."

The Chief Constable stopped suddenly. Mrs. Braxfield, taken unawares, had turned pale to the lips, and her hands tightened. She started palpably.

"Found!" she exclaimed.

"Found, Mrs. Braxfield!" said the Chief Constable sternly. "I needn't ask you if you have any ideas as to where it was found—I think you have. Now that automatic pistol has, of course, a mark and a number, and it has been identified by a gunsmith in Seleaster as one that he sold, comparatively recently, to Mr. Harry Markenmore—your son-in-law. Now, Mrs. Braxfield, we know beyond any question that you have been in the habit of using an automatic pistol of that particular sort to scare or shoot foxes.

Be candid. Was the pistol that you've been using given to you by Mr. Harry Markenmore—the pistol that is now in our possession? Come!"

Mrs. Braxfield sat silent for a while. Now and then she looked at her questioner; now and then at the rings on her fingers, which she was mechanically turning round and round. It seemed a long time before she spoke. But when she did, it was to the accompaniment of an unusually dogged and defiant look.

"I'm not going to say another word!" she said. "Bear you in mind, all of you, that I've admitted nothing!"

The Chief Constable glanced at Blick and sighed—the sigh of a man upon whom an unpleasant duty is forced, much against his will.

"Very well, Mrs. Braxfield," he said quietly. "Then there's nothing else for it—you'll have to come with us."

"Do you mean that you're going to take me to Selcaster?" asked Mrs. Braxfield, with suspicious calmness. "All right!—and you'll be more than sorry for it, as you'll see! Very well—I suppose I can go upstairs and make ready?"

"No!" said the Chief Constable. "Not out of my sight, now! You've a woman in the house—you can ring for her, and tell her to get all you want. Then—we've a cab outside."

"Ah!" remarked Mrs. Braxfield maliciously. "You're only doing what you meant to do! All right, Mr. Chief Constable, and the other two of you—you'll be sorry for this!"

But the Chief Constable silently motioned to Blick to ring the bell for the charwoman.

CHAPTER XXII

MRS. BRAXFIELD'S MOVE

Five minutes later, the charwoman, amazed and lachrymose, and holding a corner of her apron in readiness to apply to her eyes, watched the little procession move away across the garden of Woodland Cottage and over the hill-side to the edge of the grass track whereat the cab was in waiting. She kept her eyes fixed on Mrs. Braxfield until Mrs. Braxfield vanished; but Mrs. Braxfield never looked back. Her eyes were concentrated on the cab in which she was to be carried away. There were two more plain-clothes men in charge of it; one on the box, another by the door, and at sight of them she laughed satirically.

"You came pretty well prepared, I think!" she said with bitter emphasis. "I can see what was in your minds! This is what you call having a talk between ourselves—being frank and candid—and all that! Rubbish!"

"You've only got to be candid, Mrs. Braxfield, and there'll be no necessity to take you away," said the Chief Constable. "If you'll only just tell me——"

"I shall tell nothing!" retorted Mrs. Braxfield, "Nothing at all!—not one word!—until I've seen my solicitor, Mr. Crewe. I suppose you'll not deny me the right of seeing him when I get to wherever you're going to take me?"

"You shall see Mr. Crewe within ten minutes of reaching Selcaster," assented the Chief Constable. "I'll give orders to that effect. My men here will see that you're quite comfortable, and that you and Mr. Crewe have every facility you want—and I hope, Mrs. Braxfield, for your own sake, that by the time I get back to Selcaster you'll have thought better of things and been more open and candid with your solicitor than you've been with me!"

"That's my business," said Mrs. Braxfield. "I can do it without any advice from you. But—aren't you going back now? Mr. Crewe'll want you."

"Not at present," said the Chief Constable. "You'll go with my men—Mr. Blick and myself are now going to see Mr. Harry Markenmore."

Mrs. Braxfield stopped in her progress towards the cab. A curious look came into her eyes.

"You're not—not going to arrest him?" she whispered. "He——"

"Just leave us to manage our own business, if you please, Mrs. Braxfield," said the Chief Constable, "Step in!—you'll be treated with every consideration, as you'll see. Marshall!" he continued, turning to the man who had accompanied Blick and himself to the cottage. "As soon as you get to Selcaster, put Mrs. Braxfield in my room, and send Robinson at once to Mr. Crewe, asking him to come round immediately to see her. You know all the rest—I shall be back there as quickly as possible."

The cab drove away with its burden of three stolid-faced men and a highly indignant woman, and the Chief Constable took off his peaked and laced cap and wiped his forehead.

"Phew!" he said. "Disagreeable business that,

Blick! Now, why the deuce couldn't that foolish woman be candid instead of behaving in a fashion calculated to arouse suspicion? A few words—a proper explanation—and we needn't have been put to this trouble!"

"She's a determined and obstinate woman," answered Blick reflectively. "But as far as I'm concerned no amount of explanation would have satisfied me. I haven't the slightest doubt that it was she who threw this automatic pistol away down the badger-hole, and if that isn't damaging to her, I don't know what is!"

"You think it's highly probable that she shot Guy Markenmore, then?" suggested the Chief Constable.

"Well, if you want to know, I do!" declared Blick frankly. "It was probably done on the spur of the moment, but I think she did. From what I've seen of her, I think she's a woman who wouldn't stick at anything. She's evidently tremendously ambitious about that daughter of hers, and was very keen that she should be Lady Markenmore instead of merely Mrs. Harry. Fransemmery can tell you that Mrs. Braxfield was terribly upset when she found that Guy had left a son, and that Harry hadn't succeeded to the baronetcy. Whatever may result there's very strong ground of suspicion against her. She wouldn't be the first woman who's resorted to murder for the sake of family advancement—not she!"

"I wonder what made her start when I mentioned that we were going to see Harry Markenmore?" remarked the Chief Constable. "And whatever made her ask if we were meaning to arrest him? Surely, if she was in it, he isn't—can't have been an accessory?"

"Can't say!" answered Blick laconically. "But—she was taken aback. However, there is Harry Markenmore—we needn't go to the house for him."

He and his companion had crossed Deep Lane by that time, and were now traversing the park in the direction of Markenmore Court. And there, a little way before them, they saw Harry Markenmore, superintending the labours of three or four men who were engaged in felling a giant elm tree. He caught sight of them at the same moment, and presently came strolling in their direction, his eyes looking a question as they met.

"Good morning, Mr. Markenmore," began the Chief Constable. "We were just going to the house to see you. The fact is," he continued, unconsciously lowering his voice in spite of the fact that he and his two companions stood in a solitude, "a very unpleasant situation has arisen in respect of the death of your brother. Now, Mr. Markenmore, you can help us to clear it up, one way or another, if you'll give us some information: the whole thing may be capable of very easy explanation—anyway, I'm sure you'll help us if you can."

"In what way?" asked Harry. He stood, hands in pockets, glancing first at one, then at the other; in Blick's opinion he seemed to be ill at ease. "What do you want to know?"

"Well, first of all," replied the Chief Constable quietly, "we better tell you what we do know. Now don't be alarmed or upset, Mr. Markenmore, by what I have to say——"

A queer expression suddenly played about Harry Markenmore's lips, and he gave Blick an equally queer glance.

"Why should I be either alarmed or upset?" he asked. "Scarcely likely!"

"Just so, Mr. Markenmore, just so!" agreed the Chief Constable. "It isn't at all likely, but you know what I mean. Well, now, in the course of his enquiries Detective-Sergeant Blick has found that some little time ago you purchased a Webley-Fosbery automatic pistol at Widdington's, the gunsmith, in Seicester. That's so, Mr. Markenmore?"

"That is so, certainly," replied Harry. "No secret about it, either."

"I felt sure there wouldn't be," said the Chief Constable. "Very well—would you recognize that pistol if you were shown it?"

"By its mark and number—yes!" answered Harry.

The Chief Constable turned to Blick, who promptly drew the automatic pistol from his pocket and handed it over. Both watched curiously as Harry examined it.

"That's it!" he said. "But how——"

"Mr. Markenmore!" interrupted the Chief Constable. "This is where the unpleasant part of the business comes in! That pistol was found, by Detective-Sergeant Blick himself, thrown away in a hole—a badger hole—behind the bushes in Deep Lane there, last Friday evening. Now, Mr. Markenmore, have you any idea how your pistol came to be there? For it is the automatic pistol you bought at Widdington's—we've identified the number and mark."

Harry Markenmore, healthy enough in colour until then, had paled, and he was staring at the automatic pistol with a frown that was half angry and half puzzled.

"I!" he exclaimed. "How should I know how it came there!"

"But you'll know what you did with the pistol when you bought it, Mr. Markenmore!" said the Chief Constable. "I gather from your last remark that it passed out of your possession. Now, Mr. Markenmore, be frank with us! To whom did you give the pistol?—or to whom did you lend it? Anyway, who's had it?"

Harry Markenmore handed the pistol back, and replaced his hands in his pockets.

"Look here!" he said quietly. "You'd better be frank, too. Are you suggesting that it was a shot from that thing that caused my brother's death?"

"We think it extremely probable, Mr. Markenmore," answered the Chief Constable. "We showed it to the police-surgeon last night, and in his opinion, it is just the sort of thing that was used."

"And whom do you suspect of using it?" demanded Harry. "Come, now?"

He had assumed the rôle of examiner then, and he was watching the two men as keenly as they had watched him. The Chief Constable hesitated.

"I should prefer that you tell us what you did with the pistol," he began. "I think——"

"And I prefer that you tell me whom you suspect of using it on my brother," declared Harry. "Whatever you prefer, I'm not going to say anything that may incriminate perfectly innocent people! That's flat—and final, too!"

The Chief Constable looked at Blick. And Blick, who was beginning to size matters up, nodded.

"Tell him!" he murmured.

"Very well, Mr. Markenmore," said the Chief Con-

stable. "I'll take the lead. We believe there is ground of suspicion against Mrs. Braxfield. We have found out that for some time she has been in the habit of firing an automatic pistol near a spinney on the edge of Markenmore Hollow in order to frighten foxes away from her chickens, and that she has often been seen there at very early hours of the morning. Now, Mr. Markenmore, is yours the pistol she used?"

"What does Mrs. Braxfield herself say?" asked Harry quietly.

"Mrs. Braxfield refuses to say anything," answered the Chief Constable, "except that she admits firing at the foxes sometimes, at the times and place I've mentioned. And the result is that we've been obliged to take her off to Selcaster, pending enquiries——"

Harry Markenmore's face suddenly became dark with anger.

"What!" he exclaimed. "You've—arrested her?"

"Detained for further enquiries," said the Chief Constable, with a sudden approach to stern formalities. "She has only to give us a satisfactory explanation——"

"Damnation!" Harry Markenmore suddenly burst out. "Are you aware that Mrs. Braxfield is my mother-in-law? What the devil do you mean by even suggesting that she murdered my brother?"

"Be calm, Mr. Markenmore!" said the Chief Constable. "Help us to clear up this affair of the automatic pistol! Tell us if and why you gave it to Mrs. Braxfield, and if you can account for its being thrown away? Then——"

But Harry, muttering angrily to himself, suddenly turned and strode off rapidly in the direction of Markenmore Court, and though the Chief Constable

called to him, begging him to listen to reason, he marched on without taking further notice. The two men looked at each other.

"Is he to go?" asked Blick.

"What can we do?" answered the Chief Constable. "Hang it all——"

"I think I should have insisted on his going with us to Selcaster," said Blick. "If he and Mrs. Braxfield had been confronted——"

The Chief Constable, however, had turned towards the village.

"Oh, well!" he said. "There's a way of making him speak! He'll have to speak of his part in a witness-box. Let's get to Selcaster, and if that woman hasn't come to her senses under Crewe's advice, I'll charge her, formally, and bring her before the magistrates—they'll be sitting at eleven o'clock this morning."

"You'll go as far as that?" said Blick.

"I will!" declared the Chief Constable. "I shall be justified on what we know already. Come on—we'll get a trap at the Sceptre."

Half an hour later, when he and Blick drove up to the police-station, they met Crewe, the solicitor, emerging from it. He gave the Chief Constable a dry, shrewd smile.

"Um!" he said, drawing him aside. "Pretty arbitrary in your treatment of Mrs. B., I think! However, under my advice, she'll now tell you what you wanted to know. And after that, if I were you, I should just let her go quietly home. She's pretty furious—and she's given me certain instructions that'll possibly help you—though between you and me, I think she's a fool for doing it!"

"I don't understand you," said the Chief Constable curtly.

Crewe waved a sheet of paper which he carried towards the police-station.

"Go in and see her, then!" he retorted.

The Chief Constable motioned Blick to follow him to his room. One of the plain-clothes men stood outside; inside sat Mrs. Braxfield, conversing amicably with the other two, who, at a sign from their superior, went out.

"Well, Mrs. Braxfield," said the Chief Constable as he seated himself at his desk, "we've just seen your solicitor, and he tells me you are now going to give me the information I wanted. But I may as well tell you I'm a bit tired of this, and I want straightforward answers to my questions. Now then—is that automatic pistol that you've been using, to scare foxes with, one that was given you by Mr. Harry Markenmore?"

"Yes!" answered Mrs. Braxfield sullenly.

"For what purpose did he give it to you?"

"Well—it was some time after he became engaged, with my consent, to my daughter. He used, of course, to come up to Woodland Cottage and see us, in the evenings. And he often said what a lonely situation it was for two women—for Braxfield rarely came then. And one day he brought that pistol, and showed us both how to use it. And when those foxes began raiding my fowls, I thought of the pistol and used it to scare them. I never hit one, that I know of."

"Where is the pistol?" demanded the Chief Constable.

"Well," replied Mrs. Braxfield, with obvious re-

278 THE MARKENMORE MYSTERY

luctance, "I've been a fool about that! After I heard of Guy Markenmore's murder, I got nervous—frightened. I thought there might be a search made—you never know—and it would look queer for me to have a pistol, and so—well, I threw it away."

"Where?"

"Down a deep hole behind the bushes in the lane near my house," said Mrs. Braxfield.

"One more question," said the Chief Constable. "Did you see Guy Markenmore at all, anywhere, last Tuesday morning, and did you fire that pistol that morning?"

"No!" declared Mrs. Braxfield. "I never saw Guy Markenmore—have never seen him for seven years—and I never fired the pistol that morning—I hadn't it with me."

The Chief Constable took Blick aside and for some minutes they talked together in low tones. At last the Chief Constable turned round.

"Well, Mrs. Braxfield," he said, "I won't detain you any longer. You've only yourself to thank for your being brought here. You can go, now."

Mrs. Braxfield got up from her chair with dignity.

"I am going!" she said. "And it would be a bad job for anybody who kept me any longer! Just as it'll be a bad job for anybody who spreads any more rumours about me! But I've adopted a course that'll surprise some of you. And you police-folk may as well know what it is—it's something that ought to have been done before. I've instructed Crewe to get out, at once, this very morning, a bill offering a substantial reward to anybody who gives information that'll lead to the arrest and conviction of Guy Markenmore's murderer; if you police had

had half your wits about you, you'd have done that long since! Lord bless you, do you think there aren't folk in Markenmore who know something? Why, there isn't a soul in the place that wouldn't give his or her own mother away for a five-pound note! And I'm not short of five-pound notes, I can tell you! I could buy all Markenmore up if I wanted!"

"Good morning, Mrs. Braxfield," said the Chief Constable. Then, remembering that Mrs. Braxfield had come there against her will, he added politely, "Will you have a cab to drive home in? I'll order one at once."

"Thank you; I can order cabs for myself, and pay for them, too," said Mrs. Braxfield as she sailed out. "I want no favours!"

The Chief Constable sighed when Mrs. Braxfield had gone.

"I daresay that's the real truth, at least, about the automatic pistol," he remarked. "Why couldn't Harry Markenmore tell us!"

"I don't suppose that he knew that she threw it away," answered Blick. He was walking up and down the room, evidently restless and dissatisfied; finally, he brought up at a window overlooking the street. "Here's Harry Markenmore himself, with Chilford," he exclaimed suddenly. "He must have ridden in as soon as he left us in the park. They've met Mrs. Braxfield now, and she's giving them the benefit of her tongue, I think!"

"Let her!" said the Chief Constable. "I'm sick of her!"

"I'm not satisfied about her and Harry Markenmore and that pistol," observed Blick. "After all, we've only got her word for what she alleges, and

we haven't got his at all. If he gave her the pistol for the very innocent reason she spoke of—to keep in the house as a means of protection—why couldn't he say so, straight out, without all that mystery and losing his temper into the bargain? Not very satisfactory!"

"I suppose he was angry because Mrs. Braxfield is his mother-in-law, and he'd have to tell his wife of what we appeared to suspect," remarked the Chief Constable. "Not a very nice situation for a young woman who's come into a family under odd circumstances. I don't think I should have liked it had I been Harry Markenmore, to have to go and say to my young wife, 'Look here! the police have collared your mother on suspicion of murdering my brother!' Would you? So I can excuse his temper."

Blick made no reply. He continued staring out of the window in silence, for some time. Suddenly he spoke.

"Chilford's coming across here," he said. "Those two have been jawing at him no end!"

Chilford came in presently, and shook his head at the two men, with mock reproof.

"I say—I say!" he said. "Rather high-handed proceedings, eh—to collar Mrs. Braxfield like that, after trying to get her to incriminate herself? Come—come! You don't really mean to tell me, either of you, that you think it at all likely that Mrs. Braxfield would be such a fool as to murder a man to whom she'd just become related by marriage—a Markenmore, too! Really, I'm surprised——"

"Look you here, Chilford!" interrupted the Chief Constable, getting a little red about the ears, "you can be as surprised as you like! Mrs. Braxfield has

only herself to blame, and she's only gone out of here on sufferance. Let her be thankful if we don't fetch her back—and keep her!"

Chilford pulled himself together, staring.

"Oh!" he said. "Ah! Oh, very well: if you're putting it that way, I've no more to say, except that Crewe and I will put our heads together on behalf of the family. We're not at all satisfied with you police—you're not going on the right track. Why don't you recognize once and for all that the real reason for Guy Markenmore's murder was money!—money in some fashion or another—money!"

With another emphatic repetition of his last word he swung round and left the room.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE PROFESSORIAL THEORY

The Chief Constable looked at Blick when Chilverford walked out: his eyes assumed a somewhat blank and doubtful expression.

"What on earth does he mean by all that?" he exclaimed.

"That something to do with money is at the bottom of it," said Blick. "And after all, there's the three thousand pounds' worth of bank-notes to account for! There doesn't seem any doubt that Guy Markenmore had these notes on him when he left the Sceptre, and he certainly hadn't them when we examined his clothing. Where are they? Obviously, the murderer helped himself to them."

The Chief Constable reflected awhile.

"The queer thing, to my way of thinking," he observed at last, "is this: if the murder was committed for the sake of robbery, how comes it that the murderer didn't possess himself of all the rest of the stuff Guy Markenmore had on him? Money, a fair lot, I think; valuables, gold watch and chain; and so on. There was a very valuable diamond ring, wasn't there?"

"The odd thing is that another ring—the duplicate of that which Mrs. Tretheroe wears—was gone," said Blick. "Gone!—a comparatively valueless thing, merely a curiosity, while a diamond ring, worth a

great deal, was left on the very same finger! But what's the use of theorizing? The facts are as they are! If there's nothing whatever in what we'll call the Mrs. Braxfield line—well, I'm still without any real clue!”

“Chilford says—money!—money!—money!” remarked the Chief Constable. “I wish we knew more of Guy Markenmore's money affairs! But talking of money, I shouldn't wonder if that dodge of Mother Braxfield's mayn't have something in it. I know village people pretty well by now! What she said is quite true—there's scarce a soul amongst 'em that wouldn't sell his own mother for a five-pound note! Bit exaggerated, of course, that!—but it's sound in principle.”

Blick looked doubtful and surprised.

“Do you mean to say that, supposing there are people in Markenmore who really do know something about this affair, they've kept silence up to now?” he asked. “I don't mean people who might be incriminated by confession or revelation, but people who are in possession of information and simply won't give it?”

“Nothing more likely!” affirmed the Chief Constable, with the emphatic assurance of experience. “Village folk are the biggest gossips and scandal-mongers under the sun! There isn't a village in England that isn't a perfect hot-bed of slander—born of envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness! But—don't you make any mistake, my lad!—village folk, in spite of that tendency, can be as close as ever they make 'em! You might as well try to get butter out of a dog's mouth as try to extract a secret from them if they don't want to tell it. Why, I

would give you piles of proof of that out of my own experience! I remember one case that happened near here, not so long ago. A certain land-agent was shot at and badly wounded one night as he went home, and we've never yet found out who his assailant and would-be murderer was. But I haven't the slightest doubt that nearly every man and woman in that place knows who he was—only they won't say, because their chief regret is that the victim wasn't finished off. There you are!"

"But according to Mrs. Braxfield—and you seem to agree with her—these folks would tell for a five-pound note," said Blick with a cynical laugh. "Why didn't you try that in the case you mention?"

"We may do yet," replied the Chief Constable. "The victim himself seems inclined to hush the matter up, fearing worse things—but we may try a reward. In this Markenmore affair, however, Mrs. Braxfield is going to try a monetary offer—out of pure pique, I fancy!—and it won't surprise me if something results. If I were you, Blick, I should keep my ears on the stretch during the next twenty-four hours. I don't know what she'll offer, but if it's something substantial, there'll be a vast amount of cupidity aroused amongst these rustics—I know 'em!"

Blick got up from the elbow-chair in which, since Chilford's abrupt departure, he had been sitting with his legs stretched out and his hands in his pockets, looking perplexed and somewhat disconsolate.

"I may as well be going back then," he muttered. "Hanged if I know even now, if we didn't part with Mrs. Braxfield a bit too easily!"

"She'll not run away," retorted the Chief Con-

stable, with a significant nod of his head. "And if it's all a piece of bluff——"

He paused as a policeman entered the room and laid a card before him.

"The gentleman's waiting outside, sir," said the policeman.

The Chief Constable glanced at the card, started, and turned to Blick.

"Sir Thomas Hodges-Wilkins!" he murmured surprisedly. "That big scientific chap!—Professor, from Cambridge, that that fellow Spindler told us about. What on earth can he want? Bring him in, Jarvis," he went on. "Set a chair there." He looked wonderingly at the detective. "Another development!" he muttered. "What now?"

Blick made no reply. He was watching the door, through which suddenly appeared a man who was not at all the sort of person that Blick expected to see. Instead of being old, and grave, and bald, and bearded, and spectacled, and dressed anyhow, the famous professor of chemistry was a smart, alert, rather military-looking man, fastidiously attired, wearing a monocle instead of spectacles, and endowed with a breezy air and cheery smile, which he bestowed freely on the two occupants of the room as he marched in and seated himself by the Chief Constable's desk, on the edge of which he laid down two or three newspapers, heavily marked here and there with blue pencil.

"Good morning—good morning!" he exclaimed. "I don't know whether you'll guess my business from my name—or, indeed, if you know anything about it? But I've been reading the newspaper accounts of this Markenmore affair, and it seemed to me, last night,

that it was my duty to come here and tell you something. And first of all, to make things clear, have you had here a young man named Spindler, a chemist's assistant, from Farsham?"

"We have!" replied the Chief Constable.

"Did he tell you anything in which my name came up? And if so, what?"

"He told us—this is Detective-Sergeant Blick, who was with me when this man Spindler called—that a certain secret of his, respecting the preparation of some dye which he had offered to sell to Guy Markenmore, was submitted to you by Markenmore, for your expert opinion."

"Just so! It was. Markenmore got my opinion. Now—how much further had that gone?"

"Gone to this," answered the Chief Constable. "When Markenmore was murdered he had on him three thousand pounds in bank-notes, which, we believe, he was to hand over to Spindler that very morning in payment for his secret."

"Spindler was going to sell for three thousand pounds?"

"He was—so he told us."

The Professor of Chemistry screwed his monocle still further into the cavity of his eye, and took a queer, keenly-inspecting glance at the two men.

"Do you two believe—are you theorizing that Markenmore was murdered for the three thousand pounds?" he asked quizzically. "It, to be sure, looks rather obvious!"

"There is such a theory afloat," answered the Chief Constable. "He had that sum on him at three o'clock on Tuesday morning, and it was gone when his dead body was found a very few hours later!"

"Aye!" said the Professor with a short laugh. "And something else gone with it, too! Now, look here!—I'm not a policeman, but I have some intelligence. I'll tell you what Guy Markenmore was murdered for, and I'll lay all the money I've got to a China orange that I'm right, all the time. Guy Markenmore was murdered for the Spindler formula! Dead certain!"

The Professor laughed again, and slapped his elegantly-gloved hand on the desk at his side. The two listeners stared at him, and then at each other. And this time it was Blick who spoke.

"Are we to understand, Sir Thomas," he asked, "that that formula was of great value?—of greater value than the three thousand pounds?"

"Call me Professor," said the famous scientist. "Saves time—— Yes. You are to understand that! Three thousand pounds! Had it been my secret, I wouldn't have sold it for thirty thousand pounds! That chap Spindler is an ass—or awfully ignorant of market values; had he stuck to it himself he'd have made a huge fortune out of it, one way and another. I don't know if you two are at all up in this question of aniline dyes? You'll know, at any rate, if you read your newspapers, that it's a most serious question—one of rescuing a trade originally ours from its German usurpers. You know that? Very well, this young man at Farsham—clever chap, indeed!—has discovered a peculiar formula! I needn't go into details, but I know enough to be absolutely certain, in my own mind, that Markenmore was murdered by somebody who knew that he had the formula on him, and who meant to have it for himself by hook or crook. He was probably followed down here,

watched, and attacked at the lonely spot I read of in the papers.”

“That presupposes that somebody in London knew what he had on him,” said Blick.

“Somebody—in London or elsewhere—certainly must have known,” assented the Professor. “My own theory is that Markenmore told other people—financial speculators, perhaps, about this—and he may have shown them my opinion as an expert. But I’ll tell you my own share in the transaction. I have, as you may know, a European reputation as a chemist. Well, Markenmore wrote to me, enclosing Spindler’s formula and a handsome fee, asking me to tell him what I thought of it. I recognized the immense value of the thing at once, and I wrote out my opinion, and returned the formula with it to Markenmore. I was so anxious that the secret of the formula should be kept that I adopted unusual precautions in sending the papers (which no living soul but myself had seen while they were in my possession) to him; instead of posting them I gave them, heavily sealed, to a trusted assistant of mine—an assistant in my laboratory—who was just then going to London for a holiday, so that they might be delivered to Markenmore himself, by hand, at his office in Folgrave Court. That they were so delivered, I know. The assistant to whom I have referred, though he did not know what precisely the packet contained, knew that its contents were of supreme consequence, and, indeed, of monetary value, and he was most careful to hand the packet to Markenmore in person. And when Markenmore came down here that night, he would have these papers on him—the formula itself, and my opinion

on it. I tell you again, my belief is that he let somebody else into the secret, that that somebody followed him, watched him, and murdered him! The Spindler formula is at the bottom of the whole thing!"

A period of silence followed, during which the three men looked at each other. The Professor broke it at last, with a direct question.

"You've no clue so far?"

"None!" answered Blick.

"You'll have to hark back," said the Professor. "London! Get at some of Markenmore's recent doings there. Now, as I came through London from Cambridge yesterday, I made it in my way to call at Markenmore's office in Folgrave Court to make a few enquiries. Markenmore's head clerk gave me some information. He remembered my assistant, Mr. Carter, calling. He himself saw Carter deliver to Markenmore my sealed letter; he saw Markenmore give Carter a receipt for it, which Carter sent on to me by post. I have it in my pocket now. The head clerk says that as soon as Carter had gone, he saw Markenmore break the seals of my letter, draw two papers from it and read them. Markenmore, the moment he had finished them, went into the telephone-box in the hall of their building and presumably rang somebody up. Within half an hour a man came who was an absolute stranger to the head clerk; he is positive that this man had never been there before, but he remembers him well—a foreigner, by appearance—and can give you an accurate description of him. Now, the clerk saw Markenmore produce my sealed letter—unsealed, of course, I mean—and show this strange man the two papers which it contained.

A few minutes later they went out together. Now, who is that man? You'll have to find him."

The Chief Constable looked at Blick.

"This" he said, "seems like shifting the scene of your operations."

But Blick looked at the Professor.

"What description—of this stranger—did Markenmore's clerk give you?" he asked.

"Dark, swarthy, middle-sized, middle-aged man—very well dressed," responded the Professor promptly. "The sort of man, he said, you see much of in financial circles. Some sort of a foreign Jew—in the clerk's opinion."

"Had such a man come into these parts, he must have been seen," said Blick. "I've made minute enquiries about the recent presence of strangers at all the railway stations——"

"There are other ways of transport than railways," observed the Professor. "But, anyway, here's one thing certain—Markenmore showed the formula and my opinion on it to this man!"

Blick walked about the room awhile, in his favourite attitude—head down and hands in pockets. He turned at last to the Chief Constable.

"Well, I'm going back to Markenmore," he said. "There are certain things to see to, there. Afterwards——"

"We must have more talk," responded the Chief Constable. "As you say—afterwards."

The Professor rose and picked up his hat and walking-stick.

"I am going to stay at the Mitre here for a day or two," he said. "So, if you want me, you'll know where to find me. But while I am here, I should like

to see the scene of all this mystery, and if you're going out there, Sergeant, I'll go with you, if I may."

"Great pleasure, sir," replied Blick.

He took the Professor out and through the streets of Selcaster to the long straight road that led towards Markenmore. As they walked along he detailed to him the whole of his own proceedings, from the finding of the dead man to the affairs of that morning with Mrs. Braxfield.

"Whether the offering of a reward will do any good, I don't know," he said in conclusion. "If anybody had seen such a stranger as you indicate it might, but I'm sure I should have heard of that before now."

"Ah, you'll have to go back on your trail—you'll have to go back on your trail!" said the Professor. "The secret lies away back, I'm convinced. All the theories are wrong, so far!—it's not money—at least not ready money. It's the Spindler formula—with its vast potentialities. Now, what does this Mrs. Braxfield propose to offer for information?"

"Don't know—she didn't say," answered Blick. "But we soon shall know. Look there!"

A bill-poster's cart, driven by a man in white linen overalls, passed them, going rapidly in the direction of the village.

"Her solicitor spoke of having these things out at once," continued Blick. "He's evidently lost no time—that chap's going out to post them."

"Small result, I fear!" said the Professor. "My own opinion is that the whole thing was too carefully engineered. Nothing would come out here."

"You never know," replied Blick. "All sorts of things help."

They walked on to the entrance to the village. There, at the first blank wall he had come across, the bill-poster was already busy—a group of open-mouthed women and children around him.

The two men stopped, as the bill, a big square sheet, in heavy black lettering, was pasted, wet and shining, on the wall. The Professor, adjusting his monocle, read it aloud:

ONE HUNDRED POUNDS REWARD

Whereas Guy Markenmore, Esquire, late of Markenmore Court, near Selcaster, was found shot dead on the Downs near Markenmore Hollow on the morning of Tuesday, April 24th last, and is believed to have been murdered: Take notice that the above-mentioned sum, one hundred pounds sterling, will be paid to any person giving information which will lead to the arrest and conviction of the murderer. Such information may be given to the police, or direct to

GILBERT CREWE,
Solicitor, Selcaster.

"Um!" remarked the Professor, turning away with something of a sardonic smile. "Your Mrs.—What's-her-name?—Braxfield doesn't err on the side of generosity! Now, if she'd said five hundred!—eh?"

"Mrs. Braxfield," said Blick, with a glance at the folk who were eagerly spelling out the contents of the poster, "observed cynically to the Chief Constable and me that there wasn't a man or woman in Markenmore who wouldn't give his or her own mother away

for a five-pound note! Now there are twenty fives in a hundred, so——”

“Twenty times the inducement!” laughed the Professor. “Good arithmetic, anyway! Aye, well, my friend, I don’t think this will do much good. But, as a curiosity, I should like a copy of that bill. Do you think our worthy of the paste-pot and brush would give us one?”

“Nothing would please him better, I should think,” said Blick. “Especially if you give him the price of a pint of ale—bill-posting, I believe, is considered to be thirsty work.”

The Professor laughed again, and approaching the bill-poster, appropriated a couple of his bills, and handed him half a crown.

“Going to stick these things up all over the countryside I suppose?” he asked, as he handed one bill to Blick, and folded up the other for his pocket. “Mean to create a widespread interest, eh?”

“Something of that sort, sir,” answered the bill-poster. “Such was my instructions. Two hundred copies of that poster I have in my cart, and up they go before dinner-time, all round this here village. And,” he added with a wink, “a fat lot of good they’ll do!—in my opinion.”

“No good, you think?” suggested the Professor. “Why not?”

“ ’Cause that there affair’s a darned sight too deep down in mystery!” said the bill-poster. “Deep, deep, deep—gentlemen! A deed o’ darkness!—and ain’t going to be found out in a hurry. But business is business, and I must go on with mine, which at present is to excite everybody and arouse cupidity and avaricious feelings!”

"A humorist!" observed the Professor, as the bill-poster hurried away. He walked on into the village at Blick's side, looking about him with inquisitive eyes. Suddenly he caught sight of the Sceptre. "Ah!" he said. "So that's the Inn where the midnight meeting took place? I should like to look in there—I wonder if they could give us some lunch?"

"I'm staying there," replied Blick. "My headquarters. And I've a private sitting-room. If you'll honour me, sir, I'll order lunch whenever you like—they're well provided."

The Professor professed himself delighted, and for the next hour or two he and Blick, over the luncheon-table and round the fire, discussed the Markenmore problem in all its ramifications. At three o'clock in the afternoon they went out to examine the scene of the drama, with Markenmore Hollow as a final objective. But as they strolled along the road, Blick suddenly caught sight of Daffy Halliwell, just within the wicket gate of the Dower House—and he saw, too, that Daffy quietly signalled her desire to speak with him.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE MAN WHO COULD GUESS

As she made her signalling movement towards Blick, Daffy retreated a pace or two within the thick shrubbery, and the expression in her eyes indicated a desire for secrecy and caution. Blick, in his turn, signed to his companion to follow him, and whispered an aside as they left the road and passed through the wicket-gate.

"This is one of the women I told you of," he murmured. "Mrs. Tretheroe's maid—Daphne Halliwell, sister of the girl Myra Halliwell, who married Guy Markenmore. She's therefore aunt to the new baronet!—and as deep as they make 'em. Come with me—I'll let her think you're an assistant of mine."

"Excellent!" said the Professor. "An adventure! By all means, my dear fellow! The lady looks as if she had something to impart."

"I shouldn't wonder!" answered Blick. "As I say—she's deep."

Daffy had retreated further up the walk between the laurel and holly bushes; she now stood awaiting their approach, and as they drew near, she looked closely at the Professor, and especially at his fashionable attire. Her eyes glanced a question at Blick.

"All right!" whispered Blick. "Professional friend of mine. What is it?"

"I want to speak to you," said Daffy. She looked round at their surroundings and then at a narrower path which opened close by. "Come along here," she went on. "There's an old summer-house down there that's never used—we shall be safe there."

The two men followed Daffy's trim figure through a maze of shrubs until they came to a rustic arbour set in the midst of high trees. Entering this, a dilapidated and mouldy place, she turned and confronted Blick with another side-glance at the Professor.

"I wanted to speak to you, Mr. Blick," she said, in low tones. "I'd been waiting there at the gate some little time, thinking I might see you coming out of the Sceptre. My mistress has driven into Selcaster, so I shan't be wanted, and nobody's likely to come here, so we're safe enough for a bit of talk. Look here! there's a reward out, isn't there?"

"One hundred pounds," assented Blick, watching her narrowly.

Daffy made a grimace.

"Oh, well!" she said. "It's a miserable amount, but I don't want it, and I don't know anything that would enable me to get it. But—now, this is between ourselves, isn't it?"

"Absolutely!" declared Blick. "Strictly so. Tell us anything you like—and can."

"Well, I know of somebody who, I believe, has made a pretty good guess at the truth about Guy Markenmore," answered Daffy. "And he's a man who'd be glad of a hundred pounds, for he wants to emigrate."

"What man?" asked Dick.

Daffy lowered the tones of her voice.

"Jim Roper!" she whispered. "You've heard of him?"

"Yes," replied Blick. He was already wondering how much of whatever was coming was to be relied on; as far as he had seen into her character, Daffy did not seem the sort of woman to tell anything that would not benefit herself. But she might have reasons for benefiting Jim Roper which was not yet apparent. "Yes," he repeated, "I've heard of Jim Roper. He's the man who wanted to marry your sister, Myra, isn't he—the sister who ran away with and married Guy Markenmore?"

"That's just it," assented Daffy. "It's because he was about to marry Myra when she threw him clean over and went off with Guy Markenmore that Roper hasn't spoken. But a hundred pounds might induce him to speak!"

"What do you mean, exactly, about it's because of that?" asked Blick. "And what is it that he hasn't spoken of?"

"Well," replied Daffy, with a glance that took in both men, "it's like this—Roper is, and always was, what you'd call a dark-tempered man. The sort that never forgets nor forgives. He'd always meant to marry Myra, and she'd promised him, too. In fact, they were just about to have the banns published when she suddenly ran away with Guy. And, of course, nobody—not even me, her own sister!—ever knew what had become of her until recently, when all this business came out about their having got married. Roper, when she first went off, went many a time to London to look for her. He never got a trace of her, of course, but he always swore that it was Guy Markenmore who'd enticed her away. And

he swore something else, too—that if ever he chanced across Guy Markenmore he'd kill him, if he swung for it there and then. He meant it, too! That was about the last thing he said to me just before I went to India, with Mrs. Tretheroe, and it was the first thing I heard him say when I came back here, seven years later."

"Still meaning to do it, eh?—after seven years?" said Blick.

"I believe he'd have done it if he'd met Guy Markenmore after seventeen years!" replied Daffy. "He's that sort! I could see he'd got worse with brooding over it. It was the one thing on his mind. Why, it's only a fortnight ago that I met him here—abouts one day, and happened to mention that old Sir Anthony was on his last legs, and that I'd wondered if Guy would come back and be master, and he scowled and said that if Guy ever came back it would only be to get a knife through him! And I'll tell you, since it is between ourselves, that when I heard that Guy had been murdered, I fully believed that Roper had met him that morning and done for him—I really did!"

"And you don't believe it now?" suggested Blick.

"No!" asserted Daffy. "But I believe Roper has a very good idea as to who did murder him. In fact, he may have more than an idea—he may know. And I tell you that he may be inclined to tell you for a hundred pounds, for now that he knows Myra is dead, he wants to leave here and go abroad."

"What makes you think that Roper knows something?" enquired Blick. "Let's have it straight out, now! Has he said anything to you?"

"Yes!" replied Daffy. "I met him a night or

two ago, when he'd come down to the village to do his shopping. We got talking by that gate where you met me just now, and, of course, it was all about the murder. I asked him straight out if he'd had anything to do with it? He said no, worse luck, he hadn't! And then he said more. 'I could tell something about it,' he said, 'but I ain't going to, for the thing's done, now. I ain't going to help the police,' he went on. 'Let 'em do their own work.' That was all—he went off, then."

"Giving you no more idea than just that?" asked Blick.

"He said nothing but that," replied Daffy. "But I'm sure he knows something. Only, if you begin questioning him, for God's sake don't let him know I told you!"

"I can get over that, easily, if you'll just tell me this," said Blick reassuringly. "Did Roper make threats against Guy Markenmore in anybody's presence beside your own?—in the old days, I mean?"

"Oh, he certainly did in the old days!—before I went to India," asserted Daffy. "I've heard of him saying dreadful things at the Sceptre. I should think there's many a man in the village who's heard him."

Blick's memory went back to the first conversation he had overheard at the Sceptre, and to the remarks of certain of the village men as to the feelings of enmity cherished by various unnamed persons of the neighbourhood against Guy Markenmore.

"All right," he said. "Your name shan't come in. I've heard something of Roper's threats and feelings elsewhere. But now, where does Roper live?"

"All by himself, in a cottage amongst the woods

on the other side of the Downs, behind Markenmore Hollow," replied Daffy. "He keeps himself to himself up there—never comes down this way, except once a week to buy his groceries and meat."

"What sort of man is he?" asked Blick.

"He used to be as nice a lad as there was anywhere about, till Myra ran away," answered Daffy. "But that soured him. He's a black, gloomy, quiet man, now—scarcely speaks, and never smiles. I don't know if you'll get anything out of him or not, but I'm perfectly certain he either knows something or has guessed at something."

"You're quite sure, in your own mind, that Roper himself is innocent?" suggested Blick, looking searchingly at her.

Daffy Halliwell glanced at both men and uttered a queer laugh.

"Yes!" she exclaimed. "I'm certain of that!"

"Why, now?" asked the Professor, speaking for the first time since the beginning of the conversation.

"Why are you certain?"

Daffy turned her regard more particularly to the second questioner. After looking carefully at him for a full minute, she spoke.

"You look as if you'd understand—whoever you are," she said suddenly. "And that you're a policeman—plain-clothes or otherwise—I don't believe! I'm certain Jim Roper didn't kill Guy Markenmore, because if he had he's just the man to have let it be known that he'd had his revenge! He wouldn't have cared twopence if they'd hanged him next day!"

Blick exchanged another word or two with Daffy as to Roper's exact location, and he and his com-

panion went off. The Professor marched along in silence for awhile.

"That woman possesses a power of keen insight into character," he remarked at last. "She'd make a useful member of your force, Blick! I'm sure she's quite right in what she said just now. A man of the sort she described, who'd nursed his desire for revenge all these years, wouldn't care very much who knew that he'd satisfied it at last. For him, you see, it would be the end!—all else would be nothing."

"What about self-preservation?" suggested Blick.

"I don't think he'd be at all careful about that," replied the Professor thoughtfully. "No!—the woman's intuition is right. I think we must acquit this man Roper. A much-wronged man, too, evidently. I'm curious to see him."

"I daresay we shall soon find him," said Blick. "He'll be somewhere in the woods."

He led his companion up Deep Lane, past The Warren and Woodland Cottage, to the summit of the high ground above Markenmore Hollow. Beyond that point Blick had never been; he was surprised to find himself contemplating a stretch of country which in its wildness and diversity contrasted strongly with the pastoral and landscape country that he and his companion had just left behind them. Here, on the northern side of the uplands, the hill-sides were broken into deep dark combs and ravines; great masses of rock jutted out from the slopes; old, dark, apparently impenetrable woods were on all sides; the two men, looking round in astonishment at the almost savage character of the scene, observed that as far as they could see there was not a human habitation in sight.

302 THE MARKENMORE MYSTERY

"A wild scene!" remarked the Professor. "Deserted!"

But Blick lifted a hand.

"Hark!" he said.

From somewhere to the right of where they stood came the unmistakable ring of an ax, laid with vigour to the root of some tree. Turning in that direction, they saw the tall slender spire of a pine sway, totter, and disappear amongst the lower trees, amidst which it had stood: a dull crash followed.

"That'll be our man at work," said Blick.

Silently the two men crossed the hill-side in the direction whence the sound of the swinging ax, now evidently laid aside, had proceeded. Within a few minutes they reached a belt of trees, through an opening in which they saw a clearing in the wood beyond. There, beside the fallen pine, stood a man, at that moment in the act of lighting his short clay pipe. His ax lay against the tree which it had just felled; near it a dog was curled up against its master's coat. It cocked an ear and opened an eye as the two strangers drew near; at its low growl, the man turned and gave his visitors a sullen, questioning glance.

"A formidable-looking fellow!" murmured the Professor. "And that ax of his is a fearsome weapon, Blick! I should speak him very fair—to begin with."

Blick smiled.

"I shan't frighten him!" he answered. "Persuasion goes further than force. Good afternoon!" he continued pleasantly, as they came nearer the object of their search. "Are you James Roper?"

"My name, mister," replied the woodman.

"That's mine," said Blick, producing one of his

professional cards. "You may have heard of me. I'm staying at the Sceptre."

Roper took the card, glanced at it and at Blick, and handed it back, unconcernedly.

"Heard something o' the sort," he answered.

Blick sat down on the fallen pine, and pulled out his pipe and tobacco.

"I wanted to know if you couldn't give me a bit of information, Roper," he said. "You live hereabouts, don't you?"

"Close by," replied Roper, in tones which signified that it was none of Blick's business where he lived.

"Then you know this district—these woods and hill-sides and downs—very well indeed, I should think," continued Blick. "Out on them and amongst them early in a morning, and perhaps late at night, no doubt?"

Roper made no answer. He had got his pipe fairly going by that time, and he now picked up his ax and began to lop away the upper twigs and slighter branches of the tree on which Blick had seated himself. Blick assented to his silence and kept his own, the ax ceased, and Roper, leaning on its shaft, looked at his questioner.

"You ain't come up here for nothing!" he said, with a scowl. "What might you be after? I do hear as how you're a-enquiring into that there affair at Markenmore Hollow. I don't know nothing about it. Might strike 'ee that if I did I'd ha' come somewheres your way or to they police at Selcaster, and ha' told."

"And it might strike me that you wouldn't," retorted Blick, with a sly glance at his man. "I've learnt a good deal since I came into these parts.

You'd a pretty good grudge against Guy Markenmore yourself, eh?"

Roper scowled more darkly than before.

"Don't know nothing certain about how he come by his end, anyhow," he muttered. "And as to grudges, there's them around here as knows how that varmint treated I! Ain't a decent man, same as what I've been, a right to have his feelings about another man as treated him bad?"

"You've the same right to your feelings that every other man has," agreed Blick. "Who says you haven't?"

Roper looked somewhat mollified.

"Well," he remarked slowly, "'cause o' such feelings as I do have, I 'oodn't ha' lifted a finger to presarve that man! He got what such-like desarnes! But I ain't no, what you might call certain idea whatever who he got it from."

"You mean—if it comes to precise particulars," insinuated Blick. "But now look here, Roper. You knock about a good deal round this part, early and late, and I guess you've a pair of sharp eyes and a pair of sharp ears as well. Guy Markenmore's dead!—good riddance to him, if you like!—I don't care, I'm sure. But what's it matter if you, if you have any knowledge of any sort about him, just before his death, if you let it out—especially if it's made worth your while? For instance—in going about, as you do, have you ever seen anything suspicious, or met any suspicious characters? Have you ever heard or seen anything out of the common?"

Roper looked from one visitor to another. The Professor, smoking a cigar, was watching him attentively.

"Ain't heard nothing about it's being worth anybody's while to tell anything as they might chance to know," said Roper suddenly.

Blick silently drew out his copy of the reward bill and handed it to the woodman; the Professor, keenly attentive, saw Roper's eyes brighten at sight of the heavy type in which the particulars of Mrs. Braxfield's reward were printed. He drew his heavy brows together as he laboriously read through the offer.

"How does that strike you?" asked Blick presently. "There's a hundred pounds to be picked up by anybody who can tell a bit. If you know anything—mind, Roper, I'm not implying that you do!—but—if you do—eh?"

Roper began to fold up the reward bill; his eyes were fixed thoughtfully on the trees in front of him as he handed the paper back to the detective.

"Keep it!" said Blick. "It's posted all over the place. If you do chance to know anything at all, Roper, cut in first!"

"That there money?—a hundred pound," said Roper slowly. "Is it a sure thing?"

"I'll guarantee that!" answered Blick. "Dead certain!—to anybody who can give accurate information. Have you got any?"

"Money down?" asked Roper.

"Money down!" assented Blick. "Spot cash!"

Roper's pipe had gone out. He suddenly seated himself on the fallen tree, and proceeded to re-light the tobacco, with a deliberation which showed that he was being equally deliberate in his thoughts.

"I could do wi' a hundred pounds!" he said suddenly. "'Tain't a great deal, sure-ly—but it 'ud do

me a good turn. I'm sick and weary o' these parts, now, and I want to be off—I want to start a new life, somewhere's far away! That man Guy Markenmore—he broke my life in two, as you might say, and now—well, if I've the money I'll go right away out o' this, and see new places and faces, and try if I can't forget. I've lived overmuch alone, and——”

Blick had not been prepared for this outburst of feeling, nor was he prepared for an equally sudden, wholly impulsive, similar display from the Professor.

“Look here, my man!” he exclaimed. “You don't know me—never mind!—Blick here does. Now then, if you want a new start—another life, eh?—I'll give you a hundred pounds in addition to this reward money—great pleasure, I'm sure—and just now! But—if you know anything—tell!”

Roper stared in amazement at the Professor, who nodded his head vigorously.

“Thank 'ee sir!” he said suddenly. “I see you means it—you're a man with a bit o' heart in you! Well, I don't know nothing positive, but I can make a pretty good guess at—something!”

CHAPTER XXV

THE DEVIL'S GRIP

The Professor, leaning forward on his walking-cane, and the detective, watching the woodman with a sharp side-glance, alike felt that they were on the verge of a revelation. But Blick's brain was busy with a queer, confused doubt. Roper talked of guess-work, and it was not guess-work that Blick wanted; he was wondering what Roper meant by guess-work. And yet—for all they knew, they might at that instant be within tangible distance of the much-wanted truth.

"Well?" he said. "Well? What is it?"

"Seems little enough when you come to tell of it, like—and I'm no great hand," replied Roper. "But—this here! Last Monday night it was—night afore Guy Markenmore was found, beyond there, at Markenmore Hollow. That night, after I'd had my supper, I left my cottage to walk to Mitbourne—there was a man there as I wanted to see. I took up the hill-side, just behind Woodland Cottage, and struck into that grass-track that run a-top of the downs from thereabouts to near Mitbourne Station. And I might ha' been about a mile or so along that when I hears men a-coming towards me——"

"What time was that, Roper?" interrupted Blick.

"It 'ud be about a quarter-past eight, and nicely

dark. Now, I'd reasons o' my own for not wanting to be seen going Mitbourne way, so when I hears they men a-coming along, I slips behind a big clump o' gorse that was handy, and stands still. Bimeby, these two comes walking closer—I see 'em outlined against the grey o' the sky over Selcaster way, d'ye see. One tall man—one shortish man. A few yards away, the tallish man pulls up and lights a cigar. I see his face in the light o' the match. Then you might ha' knocked me down with a feather, for 'twas the man I hadn't never stopped thinking about for seven bitter years, and you may reckon who that was—Guy Markenmore! I see him so well—just for a minute—as I do see you; no mistaking of him, for there wasn't as much alteration in his face, damn him! as what I do allow he'd ha' seen in mine. There he was, and if it hadn't been for t'other with him, I'd ha' gone for him there and then. But—I didn't! They come on, talking, they hadn't never stopped talking since I first see 'em——”

“Hear what they said?” asked Blick.

“Not to remember—only words here and there. Until they come right opposite me—then, as they walks past, I hears something distinct enough. Guy Markenmore, he say it—‘I shall be coming along here about four o'clock in the morning to catch the four something from Mitbourne for Farsham,’ he say, and then he laughs. ‘You’ll be safe and snoring in your bed,’ he say, ‘at that time, no doubt.’ ‘Don’t you be too sure!’ say the little fellow. ‘I’m as early a bird as there is when I’m in the country!’ Then they go on, Markenmore way, and I see 'em disappears round the corner of a spinney that stands about there. And then——”

"A moment, Roper," interrupted Blick. "The second man—the littlish chap you describe. Did he talk like a countryman? Like anybody about here, you know?"

"No!" replied Roper with emphasis. "Not he! London way o' talking, his. Wasn't nobody belonging to these here parts, I know. I been in London, to my sorrow! A Londoner, I set he down for."

"You didn't see his face?"

"I didn't see nothing of he, 'cepting his figure, like. He stand away, as it were, out o' the light when Guy was a-lighting of his cigar, so I didn't catch nothing of his looks. But he was a littlish, broadish chap. To be sure, I didn't take no great notice of he—'cause I was wishing he wasn't there at all!"

"Well—what then?" asked Blick.

"Then I goes on to Mitbourne and do my business with the man as I wanted to see," said Roper, "and when that was done, I had a pint o' ale with him at the Cock and Pie, and so come home again."

"Aye," remarked Blick. "Just so! And——" he paused and gave Roper a particularly knowing look. "Anything else?" he asked.

"I ain't a-going to keep nothing back," said Roper. "There is something else. Don't 'ee forget as how I'd been keeping my feelings warm for Guy Markenmore for seven years! A man what's been wronged as I had, he don't forget easy. And when I gets to my cottage, all alone, that night, after I come in from Mitbourne, I sat a-thinking. And I did remember—'cause I hadn't forgotten!—what Guy say to that chap he was with, about being on that footpath to Mitbourne at four o'clock next morning. So I gets up at three o'clock and sets off to meet him, intend-

310 THE MARKENMORE MYSTERY

ing, if I did find him up there, to have it out wi' he—once for all!"

"Did you find him?" asked Blick quietly.

Roper glanced from the detective to the Professor.

"Aye!" he answered equally quietly. "I found him! But there'd been somebody there before me. He was warm, then—but dead enough, wi' a bullet through the brain!"

The Professor gave a little sigh. But Blick showed no sign of surprise, and his voice, when he spoke, was more matter-of-fact than ever.

"It had happened, then, just before you got there?" he said. "See anybody about?"

Roper shook his head.

"When I found him," he replied, "I made out as how he'd shoot his-self. But I looked close and sharp all about him, and I see there wasn't no weapon—no pistol, revolver, nothing o' that sort. Then I looks all round—I see nobody! It was grey morning, and you couldn't see very far; there was mists amongst the spinneys and coppices, and curling along the tops o' the downs. No, I see nobody—'cepting his-self, dead."

"Did you touch him?" enquired Blick suddenly.

A curiously dark look came over the woodman's face, and now he looked, not at the detective, but at the Professor, as if he felt that in him he was secure of a certain sympathy and understanding.

"It's a queer thing," he muttered, "but a minute before I come across him, there's nothing I could ha' liked better than to lay hands on he! I'd ha' had him by the throat and shook the life out of him same as that there dog 'ud shake it out of a rat! But when I see him lying there at my feet, dead and gone, I

felt—I felt as if I couldn't bide to touch a hand to his body! He was—dead! And yet I did a thing, and it was through doing that I came to know that he was still warm."

"Yes—yes!" breathed the Professor. "What, now?"

"I see a ring on his finger," answered Roper simply. "The sort o' ring that they gipsy women do trade off on the lanes hereabouts: a thing o' no vally, you understands, but one that you'd notice. And it come on me—I dunno why—that my Myra had given it to him. And I pulled it off his finger, and I went away wi' it, leaving him there, a-staring at the sky!"

The Professor let out a long sigh. But Blick spoke.

"What have you done with that ring, Roper?" he asked.

"'Tis here!" said Roper, putting two fingers in his waistcoat pocket. "'Tis in my mind that my poor lass gave it to he! Her was fond o' gew-gaws o' that sort. Many's the time her'd been took in by they gipsy-women, trading a bit o' poor trash o' that sort to her for good money. But it's in me to think 'twas hers, and I wasn't going to let he carry that to his grave!"

"Well, you were wrong," said Blick, with remorseless candour. "Mrs. Tretheroe gave that ring to Guy Markenmore, and he gave Mrs. Tretheroe another exactly like it. They bought them in an old curiosity shop on Portsmouth Hard. It was never Myra's."

Roper looked fixedly at the detective. Blick nodded. And at that Roper, who had been turning the

312 THE MARKENMORE MYSTERY

ring over in the palm of his hand, suddenly threw it on the ground before him with a gesture of dislike.

"I had thought it med be!" he muttered. "But since it isn't——"

Blick picked up the ring and rose to his feet.

"Now, Roper," he said, "that's the whole truth?"

"All I know," answered Roper. "Can't say one word more, master."

"You'll stand by it?" demanded Blick.

"Stand by every word I've said," affirmed Roper.

"It comes to this," continued the detective, turning to the Professor. "We've heard now of a man who was in Guy Markenmore's company the evening before the murder, and who knew that Guy would be on the downs at four o'clock next morning. Who is that man?"

"Probably the man his clerk told me about," answered the Professor. "That's my opinion, anyway."

"Well, let's be going," said Blick. "I'll see you again, Roper—you've no doubt put us on the track of something."

But the Professor lingered.

"Look here, my man," he said, turning to the woodman. "You know the Mitre Hotel, at Selcaster? Very good—I'm staying there. Come and see me there, tonight; there's my card—ask for me. If you want to emigrate I'll find you the money. Tonight, mind, any time you like after eight o'clock."

He nudged Blick's elbow and hurried him away out of the wood before Roper could thank him, walking at a great pace until he and his companion were once more on the hill-side.

"There's a man into whose soul the iron has en-

tered, my friend!" he said. "Poor fellow! poor fellow! I feel deeply and sincerely sorry for him. Seven years lonely brooding over his love affair—terrible!"

"I fear you have a very deep vein of sentiment, sir!" observed Blick. "I'm sorry for the chap, too; he evidently took Myra's defection pretty badly to heart. But I'll tell you what I think, Professor—I think Master Roper ought to be feeling very thankful that I didn't request him to march down to Selcaster police-station with me! If I were not a believer in psychology as a science I should certainly have desired his presence there. But I sized him up, and watched him closely, and I think I understand his curious mental processes, and I believe he told us the truth. I only wish he'd come and confided in me a week since!"

"Do you know, I rather think that I should have done precisely what he did, had I been in his case?" remarked the Professor ingenuously. "I sympathized with the unhappy man all through. But now, my dear fellow—this mysterious person? How are you going to get on his trail?"

"The queer thing about that," observed Blick, "is this—at least, it's a surface difficulty. Taking Roper's story to be true—as I do—here's a strange man, a Londoner by his speech, says Roper, by which he probably means a man of the educated classes, on the downs with Guy Markenmore, late on Monday evening. Who is he? Did he come down with Markenmore from London? Did they meet in the train? Did they foregather on the way between Mitbourne and Markenmore? We don't know. But there are more important questions than any of these

—for one, where was that man going? Where did he go when he and Markenmore parted?—for another. And for a third, and most important one—if he's the man who shot Guy Markenmore next morning, where had he been in the meantime? Where did he spend Monday night? It couldn't have been far away from hereabouts, if he laid in wait for his victim at four o'clock next morning!"

"Puzzling!" admitted the Professor. "Yet I suppose that a man who had much at stake wouldn't mind sticking it out in these woods for a few hours—the nights are warm now, and there's a lot of shelter here, in these valleys. Now, what amazes me is—if this man murdered Guy Markenmore, as I'm sure he did, why didn't he murder him on Monday night and get away in the darkness?"

Blick laughed.

"I'll tell you why," he answered. "He was a man whom Guy Markenmore had taken into his confidence about this dye affair. He had come down with him, fully acquainted with what Guy was doing. He knew that the money business was likely to be settled that night. And he waited until morning so that he could possess himself of the cash as well as the formula you have told us of—with your opinion attached to it. Probably he is the man of whom Markenmore's clerk at Folgrave Court told you, and we'll have to try and find him. But the clue's thin and poor, so far."

The Professor nodded, paused, and looked about him. While talking, they had strolled slowly along the hill-side into a still wilder stretch of country. They were now standing on the edge of a deep ravine, which cut into the land beneath to a depth of some

two hundred feet; here and there the fall was precipitous; in the dark and gloomy recesses far below great masses of yew and pine were broken by huge blocks of grey limestone; over everything hovered a sombre and mysterious silence. But suddenly the Professor broke it.

"There is somebody signalling to us!" he exclaimed. "Down there! A woman!"

Blick looked in the direction indicated, and started in surprise. Far away below them, a little to their right, he saw a woman's figure standing near a grove of trees which lay at the foot of the most precipitous part of the ravine. And, as the Professor said, she was certainly endeavouring to attract their attention.

"Good Heavens!" he said. "That's Miss Valencia Markenmore! Whatever is she doing down there? Do you know what they call this place?—the Devil's Grip! Grip, I suppose, means a sharp cut in the surface of the land. But what can she want?"

"Let us make our way down," suggested the Professor. "We are evidently wanted. Hello! there are men, too!"

Two figures had just emerged from amongst the cluster of pine trees near which Valencia stood. Blick suddenly recognized them as those of Harbrough and Mr. Fransemmery. They, recognizing the detective, also began signalling to him.

"There's something afoot down there!" he muttered. "Looks to me as if they'd made some discovery. Look here, sir!—that tall man is Harbrough, who, as I told you, was accused of the murder by Mrs. Tretheroe; the other is Mr. Fransemmery, the old gentleman who has figured in the case."

"I know Fransemmery by name," replied the Professor. "He's a member of an archaeological society to which I also belong—I've corresponded with him. Now, how can we get down there without breaking our necks."

"There'll be a sheep-track somewhere along here," said Blick. "Where a sheep can go, we can—at a pinch."

But some minutes passed before they found a means of descending into the depths of the ravine wherein the others there awaited their coming. Once in its recesses the Professor wondered at the precipice-like character of the cliff down which they had made their way. Above the spot at which Valencia and her two companions were standing, the granite walls rose high and cliff-like; at one place there was a sheer drop of two hundred feet, terminating in a wild and broken mass of rock and shrub; it was at the lower edge of this wilderness that the three stood, looking alternately into its recesses and at the men hurrying along the level floor of the ravine towards them. At Mr. Fransemmery's heels, held in a leash made out of his master's handkerchief, the Airedale terrier fretted and whimpered, evidently desirous of once more penetrating into the gorse bushes from whence he had been unceremoniously dragged.

"That's Fransemmery's dog—the chap that unearthed the automatic pistol!" said Blick. "I wonder if he's made another discovery?"

Harborough came slowly towards them. As he approached he gave Blick a warning look and pointed to the pine trees.

"I say!" he said in a hushed voice, as they drew near. "There's a man lying dead in there!—he

must have fallen over the cliff. The terrier found him—we couldn't get him away, so I went in for him and saw this man—dead, I say. Come and see!”

They were up to the other two by that time, and Blick, without further question or any ceremony, plunged in amongst the trees, followed by the three men.

“Where is he? Who is he?” he asked. “Anybody you know?”

“A stranger—looks like a tourist,” said Harborough. “Here, at the foot of the rocks!”

He thrust and held aside the clinging branches of the pines, and suddenly revealed the body of a man, lying in a curiously twisted attitude across a mass of sharp-edged stone. One glance upward was sufficient to show what had befallen him; he had slipped from the edge of the precipice far above, and crashed without a break, on the place where he lay: a little distance from him lay the walking-stick which he had dropped from his hand as he fell.

With a sharp exclamation Blick sprang forward and turned the face, hitherto crushed in amongst a cushion of moss and heather, to the light. He rose, staring at it.

“Good God!” he said. “It's Crawley—the man I met——”

But a stronger, far more astonished exclamation came from the Professor, as he in his turn saw the dead man's face.

“Crawley?” he said. “Crawley? Man alive!—That's Carter! Carter! Carter, I tell you!”

Blick felt as if an ice-cold wave of illumination had washed across his brain. He turned on the Professor with searching eyes.

"Carter!" he exclaimed. "Your assistant?"

"My assistant!"

"The man who carried your sealed letter to Guy Markenmore?"

"That very man!" affirmed the Professor solemnly. "Good Lord! What does all this mean?"

Blick suddenly dropped on his knees by the dead man's side and abruptly plunged a hand into an inner pocket of the clothing—into a second—a third. Just as suddenly he produced a letter-case, and from it drew out a wad of bank-notes and two papers. He dropped the notes unconcernedly on the stones, and hastily unfolded the papers; a second later he thrust these into the Professor's hand.

"That's what it means!" he said quietly. "There's Spindler's formula, and there's your opinion about it. And—this is the chap who killed Guy Markenmore!"

Then he looked round at the three men. The Professor was staring blankly at the papers just handed to him; Mr. Fransemmery was staring at the Professor; Harborough, anxious and puzzled, was looking doubtfully at the dead man. It was he who spoke first, turning to the detective.

"You think he—that he killed Guy Markenmore in order to get possession of—those?" he asked, in a low voice.

Blick rose from his knees.

"What else?" he said calmly. "I see the whole thing now! Sir Thomas, there, and I already know something of it, but up to a few minutes ago I didn't suspect this man. But, as I say, now I see it—clearly enough. This man, whom I met a few nights ago at the Sceptre, posing as Crawley, a holiday-

maker, taking a walking tour round this country, is in reality Carter, an assistant of Sir Thomas's at his laboratory at Cambridge. It was he to whom Sir Thomas entrusted a sealed packet for direct conveyance to Guy Markenmore in London; he, Carter, was passing through London on his way here for his holiday. Now, although Carter did not know the nature of the precise contents of that packet, he had learnt from Sir Thomas that they were of immense scientific and monetary value. He was charged to put the packet into Guy Markenmore's own hands. He did so. Later that day Guy Markenmore travelled down here. So did Carter. Probably they met on the train; probably they travelled in company. But, at any rate, Sir Thomas and I have just found out that Guy Markenmore and Carter were together on these downs late that night, talking confidentially. Now from what I've learned about him, Guy Markenmore was a talkative, free-and-easy sort of a man, open and candid; probably, knowing that Carter was Sir Thomas's assistant, Guy took Carter into his confidence about the secret. And Sir Thomas and I have just ascertained that Guy told Carter that he would be at or about Markenmore Hollow at a very early hour next morning. What does Carter do? He forms the plan of hanging about all night—a warm night, mind!—waylaying Guy early in the morning and murdering him for the secret and for the money which was to be put together for it that night by Guy, Lansbury, and Baron von Eckhardstein. And—he carries all this into execution. What does he do, then? Goes quietly away amongst these hills and woods on his walking-tour—who's going to suspect an innocent-looking pedestrian? But, having in the

meantime read the newspapers, he works round, in his character of tourist, to the Sceptre, where I met him, and where, I confess, he thoroughly took me in. The murderer's old trick, you see, of hanging round the scene of his crime, full of a morbid curiosity to know what's been said and done. Nobody suspected this man in the slightest degree—I, myself, never dreamed of connecting him with this affair. He stayed his night at the Sceptre and went away, crossing these downs. And here!—here he met with this fatal accident, and if he hadn't, and if we hadn't found this, and those papers on him, I don't believe we should ever have known who it was that killed Guy Markenmore! But—we know now."

He stooped down and drew the dead man's soft cap more closely over his face. When he looked up again the Professor was still staring thoughtfully at the papers in his hands and Mr. Fransemmery, unusually grave, was watching him. But Harborough was already striding away through the trees, towards Valencia.



